

“Even in Darkness”

For two summers in a row, I’ve packed up my truck and headed up to Modoc County to a cluster of lava caves close to the Oregon border called Lava Beds National Monument. I visited there as a kid but didn’t explore many of the caves. Two years ago Connor and I went there and visited some of the easier caves, and last year he and I took Graham along to explore the more difficult ones. I haven’t figured out when I’m going this year, but I know I’ll get there sometime before it gets too cold. Caving is a lot of fun ... *if* you like caves. Caves aren’t for everyone. One of my favorite things to do is go as deep into a cave as I can and turn my flashlight off. Being in total darkness is disorienting. You have to rely on your other senses to try to get a picture of what’s going on around you. You don’t dare move because you could seriously injure yourself. It’s easy to understand why darkness has become a metaphor for some of our life experiences. Some events hit us swiftly and without warning - Sudden illness, death, loss of employment. We’re shocked, disoriented, and often ill-prepared and frightened. Emotionally, psychologically, spiritually – it is *dark*.

And there are other times when this darkness creeps in more slowly. It’s like we *gradually* realize that the light isn’t on and we wonder when and how it happened – The disintegration of a relationship, a crisis of faith, foolish lifestyle habits we’ve developed that are taking a toll on us, degenerative illness or having to care for someone *with* an illness. In many of these cases we can’t see where we’re going or even where we are. We’re frightened, bewildered and we wonder if it’s *always* going to be like this now. The description of darkness is fitting. But there are also times when we *long* for darkness. We long for obscurity or a hiding place from the demands of life and faith and God. We’re desperately looking for a place where we can just rest a while, or put a cover over some of the foolish things we’ve said and done. Like an “anonymity blanket” that we can hide under. You ever do that as a kid? You put a blanket or a sheet over you and you are thoroughly convinced that when you’re under that blanket, nobody can see you or know you’re there. So

with all these expressions of darkness that we experience, we are often faced with the nagging question: “Where is God in this darkness?” And along with this we may entertain the fearful possibility of, “Will this darkness engulf me? Will the light be extinguished for good?”

A couple of months ago as I was looking at the scriptures that the lectionary offered this week I noticed that each of them in some way talk about uncovering some of the darkness we encounter from day to day. The Psalm Glen read for our call to worship sets the stage:

*“If I say surely the darkness shall cover me
and the light around me becomes night
even the darkness is not dark to you ...
for darkness is as light to you”*

The story of the wheat and the weeds – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus, the master story teller offers a parable to his disciples -- A farmer woke one morning to the troublesome news that the field of good wheat which he had so carefully planted was polluted with weeds. Weeds that were growing strong in the middle of his ripening grain. Weeds that at this stage don't look terribly different than the wheat, but it's still a threat to the crop. What do you do to make sure the wheat isn't lost in the weeds? How does the farmer make sure he has a good harvest?

Maybe in our times, the story might have been about a person who wakes up one morning to find out that the company she's worked so faithfully for all her adult life got caught up in a big fraud scandal and now her pension fund, her security, her very future is in jeopardy. The company that she invested in because they provided her with such a *good* life! She was loyal to them because they were loyal to her. And now what? How did this happen? Jesus' story describes the human experience of finding the darkness of evil mixed up inseparably with that which is good. “Why is this so?” we ask. Or as the people in Jesus'

story may have thought, “Where did all these weeds come from?”

As we mature in faith and life, we realize that the mixture of weeds and wheat exists *within us* as well as the *external* circumstances of life. And I guess we get sort of accustomed to this reality. But it’s always a shock to wake up one morning to the realization that there’s evil in the world *and* in us. Like the servants in Jesus’ story who were clearly familiar with weeds growing in the wheat, our shock comes when we realize what kind of damage these weeds can do. Like the servants, we are bewildered and fearful. “What am I supposed to do? Will the wheat be *strangled* by the weeds? Is our hope that good overcomes evil crumbling right in front of us?” Here’s what seems strange to us about Jesus’ story though. The farmers decide not to uproot everything like you’d expect. Instead, they agree to allow both the weeds and the wheat to grow together until harvest time. That’s when you’ll be able to clearly see the difference between the two. It’s easier to get rid of the weeds without hurting the wheat if you can clearly identify which is which. Contrary to popular belief, this story isn’t about the virtue of tolerating weeds. It’s an *assurance* that evil will be dealt with appropriately and that goodness cannot not be destroyed. It reassures the hearers that God is *not* overcome by evil nor will God’s *followers* be consumed by it. God even cautions the servants that it’s not ultimately *their* responsibility to purge the world of evil. There is hope in the guarantee that the wheat will be harvested successfully. Good will overcome evil. Light will overcome darkness.

Paul’s letter to Rome concerning the Law of the Spirit of Life and the Law of Sin and Death -- Romans 8:1-11

When you think about it, we’re all descendants of those first Christians in Rome. Spiritually *and* culturally in some cases. So with them, we listen carefully and curiously to these words of the apostle Paul. *Like us*, those people in Rome were confronted with the stark reality of suffering in their personal lives and in the life of the world at the time. *Unlike us*, they were also dealing with the fear and suffering of persecution for

their faith. What's interesting is that Paul, their pastor, was wrestling with this whole issue of suffering! See? We pastors struggle with these cosmic issues just as much as the next person, but we keep it on the hush because we think we're supposed to put on the happy-mask to keep other people's spirits up! So Paul reaches as deeply as he can into his own human experience of suffering and how God responds to this suffering. See, he's familiar with the very personal cries of pain and distress that his church is going through. He's also aware of the collective suffering of the church and how they're struggling within the realm of God's creation. But he also seems to be very aware of *God's* distress too. God wants to see people alive and transformed in God's glory. But there's a roadblock to the light of God's glory and that's the darkness of sin and death. But it's that vision of glory that helps sustain Paul during his darkest hours. That knowledge of God being with us gives him the courage and endurance he needs to lead his church out of their darkness into God's light.

In the mid-1600s, George Fox, one of the founders of the Quakers, was undergoing some serious struggles with the suffering and evil he encountered in life. Like Paul, it threatened to overwhelm him, but also like Paul he received this vision from God that transformed his life and sent him out with energy and hope to preach the Gospel and to live an active life of justice and mercy. In his journal of 1647, he describes the vision which transformed his life - *"I saw ... that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but also an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that I saw the infinite love of God."*

Let's revisit the words of that Psalm we read at the beginning of the service again --

*"If I say, surely the darkness will cover me
And the light around me become night
Even the darkness is not dark to you
For darkness and light are both alike to you"*

Like most poetry, the psalmist's words may be understood at many levels. We've only touched on some of this Psalm's meaning this morning. What these words *don't* say is that the darkness doesn't matter, or that it's not real. On the contrary, the darkness is taken very seriously. We as followers of Christ are invited into an encounter with the God who *engages* the darkness in costly ways and redeems its destruction. We are reminded that not only is God *not* overcome by darkness but God wants *us* to be able to deal with light and darkness too. Darkness can't conceal from God the things we'd like to hide. So in this sense, all of these texts are comforting and disturbing at the same time. But they all invite us to change. And in this experience, we find that the God who confronts us with truth and justice invites us to choose life. And in doing so, God promises to help us and bless us in that choice.