

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Introduction

Christmas feels like ages ago this week, and the rhythms of January are well underway. January is still winter, and the days, while they are lightening in the northern hemisphere, are nonetheless short. The texts for this week are all about finding joy underneath gloom, about finding shelter and support and delight in the midst of trying circumstances.

Our text for today is preceded by the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus has challenged the promises of earthly power made by the tempter in exchange for the proclamation of the good news that God's kingdom is alive and present. How has temptation, in whatever form you understand that for now, affected your own ministry or life of faith? Where have you felt it hard to remember the "good news" in our world? Carry these thoughts with you as you go today. Our text shares that Jesus accompanies us and is a partner in solidarity in our darkness, a darkness that should not be ignored but rather given enough space that allows us to sift through the messiness of life.

Text

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Comment

The text references Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus, "the people who have sat in the darkness have seen great light". In the looming shadow of death that was the exile, there has been a glimpse of light for the people of Israel: darkness verses light. In a world that values the light over the dark, which is evident in the many ways that we tend to hide from the dark, it is often imagined that we will find freedom and security in the former rather than the latter.

Our comfort level is often determined by our capability to be aware of our surroundings or our ability to "see". The unknown brings us great discomfort and that discomfort causes us to seek refuge in the light. The state of the world does not allow us to hide from the darkness, for darkness manifests itself in a variety of ways through the systems that we have created—locally, nationally, and globally.

The challenging question, however, is whether we should continue to avoid the darkness. Night and Day were created. There is beauty in being present in the darkness. What lessons can be gleaned from our experience of learning to walk faithfully in the dark? Jesus continued to walk faithfully during times when the path ahead was clear and when it was not.

How can we shift our "rejection" of darkness into the recognition that wonder and holy transformation of ourselves and our relationships can arise from what we most often avoid? In reference to the experience of the wilderness, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with temptation, God will supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it." Sitting in the dark can invoke experiences that we have tried to avoid, but the movement of the Spirit within the dark can show us more than we ever imagined. We need moments of darkness just as much as we need the light, for that is how we truly grasp the radical nature of the kin-dom and the good news.

Two things should be noted, particularly during winter, and particularly during a season when "Darkness" is equated with sin and "light" is equated with the inbreaking of God. Firstly, this image of "darkness" is one among many metaphors for human difficulty and secondly, it may perhaps be equally accurately translated as *gloom*. It is unwise to too-easily associate goodness with light, or even the colour white, as it too easily associates evil or darkness to darker colours. The history of Europeans' religious work overseas speaks starkly of the racist practices that can be justified by such equation of colours with virtue. The writer of Isaiah speaks with many metaphors, and this is equally possible today.

Response

The writer of this week's text knew pain, suffering as well as economic, religious, political and national oppression. The writer also knew the levels of internal division that can render empty the fulness of God's goodness towards the community. A community that cannot turn in love towards one another empty the very vessels that could sustain them.

In what way do we do this? How is it that, rather than finding a joy from our shared vision for community, we envision a community that will only experience joy when we are divided from each other? We can imagine that the sacrifice of a difficult person from within our congregation will be the thing that will grant happiness to the “rest of us”, and in so doing, we re-enact a small rite of exclusion and marginalisation, treating the person we wish to exclude as Christ was treated. We miss the message of the cross, and in so doing become the persecutors, not the faithful.

The complicated message of Christianity is that God’s love is to be found in the beloved and broken community. At the heart of all of the writers’ messages is that no circumstance among the people of God will ever feel perfect enough. That’s the point, they seem to be saying. We need to be sustained by something deeper than civic ease and interpersonal harmony. And when we are sustained by that which is truly sustaining — ethical living, right relationships, rhythms of prayer — we may find that the relationships that had once seemed so disruptive are the very place of encountering God. And in this practice, we may sing as if we are placed on a high place, or hidden in the sheltering cloak of God. This is a song of joy, because it is a song sung in times of ease and in times of strain. It is a song that proclaims that love is deeper than anything.

Prayer

God of both light and dark,

Grant us peace as we wait in the dark,

Patience to recognize that the darkness can offer us wisdom from your presence,

And perseverance to remember that darkness is not all that there is.

Give us guidance as we learn to be people of your love in both the darkness and the light of the world.

In the name the Spirit that moves between us,

Amen.

Optional devotional resources

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: HarperOne Press, 2014.

