

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 14, 2018

Mercy in the Dark

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16

Last weekend, I took my mom down to Beaufort to celebrate her birthday.

We stayed in one of the cottages at the Beaufort Inn,
which has a lovely little front porch with rocking chairs.
I'm an early riser,
so both mornings I was up before the sun, sitting on that porch,
drinking coffee and working on my Sunday School lesson.

Across the courtyard, next to another little cottage, a nice Palmetto tree was growing,
and it just so happened that, both mornings,
there was a waning crescent moon in the predawn sky.
I appreciated the perfection of the moment,
sitting on the front porch of an antebellum cottage in coastal South Carolina,
enjoying a view of a Palmetto tree and a crescent moon directly before me.

The scene was beautiful,
but the reason the moon was that beautiful crescent shape
is that it was waning,
and it would continue to wane for one more night after we left.
But by Monday morning, had I been sitting in the same spot,
the moon would not be visible at all.
And by Monday night,
the sky would be dark, and would remain dark,
until the slightest sliver of moon began to appear
late on Tuesday and very early on Wednesday morning.

The time between the disappearance of the waning crescent,
to the reemergence of the waxing crescent would touch three days on the calendar,
as it does every cycle of the moon.
Three nights of darkness under a moonless sky.

After lifting up his complaint to God,
and hearing utter silence in response—
not even the least acknowledgment that he had opened his mouth in prayer—
Job is ready to let the darkness swallow him.

In one of the most poignant expressions of spiritual darkness in all of scripture,
and a heart-rending description of the experience of depression,
Job laments,

*"If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.
God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me;
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!"*

Job has lost nearly everything.

He has lost his property and livelihood to theft,
his children to death and his body to disease.
He has even lost the support of his wife,
whose cynical advice to him in chapter 2 is to ask:
*'Do you still persist in your integrity?
Curse God, and die.'*

Then along come Job's good friends to comfort him in his affliction.

They are certainly well-intentioned,
and at first they start off well, doing just the right thing:
at first they just sit in silence with their friend in his suffering;
they do not open their mouths
but they are simply with Job, so that he does not have to suffer alone;
at first, they seem to be wisely aware that the best way to help someone in grief
is just to be with them;
If Job must be consumed by grief,
at least he does not have to do so in isolation,
cut off from every human presence.

They might have brought a chicken casserole and a batch of chocolate chip cookies,
which would have been deep wisdom, indeed.

Where they go wrong is in opening their mouths,
because like many of us,
Job's friends have only so much tolerance for the darkness.
They soon fall to the temptation to
(a) explain things
and (b) fix things.

Easy explanations and quick fixes mark the end of their helpfulness.

The best advice for those who attend to others in grief
is not to try to fix or explain
since most of our platitudes—
like, "everything happens for a reason"
or "when God closes a door he opens a window"—
only increase the darkness.

But Job's friends launch into their explanations,
most of which are trying to get God off the hook,
most of which place the blame on Job.

Imagine suffering the most painful, heart-wrenching loss of your life
and then being told by your closest friends, "It's your fault."

So this is Job, chapter 23,
and Job's complaints to God will go on for 10 more chapters after this.
And his friends will continue to talk at him,
but to no avail.

Job is determined to make his case before God. He wants to know that God has heard him.
But God doesn't show up for another 15 chapters,
and until then is utterly absent.

So at the end of this reading,
Job is ready simply to descend and be swallowed by the darkness.

Actually, the Hebrew here is difficult to translate.
It could be as the NRSV has rendered it:
*If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!"*
Or more cryptically, as in the King James,
*Because I was not cut off before the darkness,
neither hath he covered the darkness from my face.*
Or more confidently as in some of the modern evangelical translations
(and modern evangelicals are nothing if not sure of themselves)
in which Job is made to say boldly,
*Yet I am not silenced by the darkness,
by the thick darkness that covers my face.*

Regardless,
whether he wants simply to descend and vanish into the darkness
or whether he is recognizing that even in the darkness he still has a voice,
the matter is clear:
Job is existing in the dark,
and not just a little dark, but really dark,
what the Bible calls "deep darkness."

This past week we just concluded our Wellness Series at Wednesday Night Fellowship.

In two of the lectures, we heard from Frank and Jennifer Clark
about their work with people suffering from mental illness
including depression and anxiety.

One of the many benefits of these conversations
was that they raised our awareness about just how many people
suffer from depression and/or anxiety,
as well as other mental illnesses.

The hope is that we can lessen the stigma associated with mental illness,
partly by dispensing with the idea that depression and anxiety
are some sort of moral failing on the part of the sufferer
(which is exactly the case being made by Job's friends
in their ill-advised advice).

As pastor of Fourth, and of other congregations before you,
I can assure you that “the people walk in darkness.”
So please, as Paul advises, *Be kind to one other, tenderhearted,*
because any person you encounter may be swallowed up in some darkness.

And if that person is you—
if your prayer at night is like Job’s
If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!—
then please seek help,
because you can be helped.

I’m not talking about quick fixes or easy answers.
But you can find relief. You can find mercy.
You can be helped to cope with your circumstances
so that you are not consumed by the darkness of depression and anxiety.
You may be depressed, but you do not have to live in utter despair.
There is mercy in the dark.

In her first sermon here at Fourth,
Pastor Jackie referenced Barbara Brown Taylor’s book,
Learning to Walk in the Dark.

The book is full of insight for those who find themselves in a dark place in life.
Taylor offers some “good news you can use:
Even when light fades and darkness falls—
as it does every single day, in every single life—
God does not turn the world over to some other deity.
Even when you cannot see where you are going
and no one answers when you call,
this is not sufficient proof that you are alone.
There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it,
along with all your language for calling it to your aid...”¹
Remember, *darkness is not dark to God;*
the night is as bright as the day.” (Ps 139)

Taylor reminds us that in the Old Testament
it is this same deep darkness that contains the presence of God.
Remember, when Moses goes up on the mountain to meet with God
he enters the thick darkness of the cloud
and there God speaks to him.
“The thick darkness reveals God’s presence even while obscuring it,
the same way the brightness does.”²

This is good news.
And it suggests that, perhaps,
when we find ourselves lost in a cave of utter darkness,
they way out is actually by going further in
and facing the darkness
in order to learn from it.

Unfortunately, our modern approach to grief is that it is simply a problem to be solved,
a brokenness to be fixed as quickly as possible.

In these days of easy answers and quick fixes,

“Grief...perhaps the most inevitable of all human emotions,
given the unalterable fact of mortality...
is seen as an illness if it goes on too long.”

In a sort of “spiritual bypassing”

we often try to use religion to dodge the dark emotions
instead of letting it lead us to embrace them
as the best, most demanding spiritual teachers
we may ever know.”³

So hear the good news:

if you find yourself swallowed up in the darkness,
feeling as if that you may vanish into the void forever,
do not be afraid;
you are not alone,
and though God may be invisible to you,
you are not invisible to God.

The letter to the Hebrews assures us that we are not hidden from God.

God always sees us.

There may be times when we know ourselves to be guilty,

times when we feel ashamed, that we may wish to be hidden from God,
as the man and the woman tried to hide from God
in the garden.

But even if we wanted to, we could not hide
from the One whose love will always seek us out,
wherever we are.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, says the writer of Hebrews,

let us hold fast to our confession:

*we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God.*

*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.*

In the life and ministry of Jesus, in the suffering and death of Jesus,

God has entered into solidarity
with every suffering human life.

There is, perhaps, no other experience in which Christ draws nearer to us,
than when we find ourselves lost in the dark.

In the deep darkness, you are not alone.

In the deepest darkness,

there is a hand that will slide into yours,
that will lift you up and make you stand,
and will guide you through the night
and lead you on to the light.

*The darkness is not dark to God, the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to God.*

*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness—
the throne of grace that is most accessible in the dark—
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help
in time of need.*

Remember, it is the mystery of God's way that
"New life starts in the dark.
Whether it is a seed in the ground,
a baby in the womb,
or Jesus in the tomb,
[new life] starts in the dark."⁴

One last thing.

Hebrews says that Jesus sympathizes with us in our human weakness.
Sympathize — *Sym-patheos* — means, "to feel with."
Jesus feels your feelings.
God feels your feelings.

So if we want to be Christ-like, if we want to follow Christ,
then we can begin by feeling with others.

It is the gift of Christian community to walk together
in the darkness with each other.

That is to say, the good news of mercy in the dark is
not only our assurance
but also our calling,
not only our salvation
but also our service,
not only the blessing we receive
but also the blessing we give.

Sym-patheos — feeling with — one another.

It is the way of Christ.

Because there is help
there is grace
there is mercy for all...

...in the dark.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015) 15-16

² Taylor, 46-47

³ Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, quoted in Taylor, 76-77

⁴ Taylor, 129