

In the Darkness...Grace

January 5, 2014 Sermon delivered by Sharon J. LeClaire M.Div, MATS

West Valley Presbyterian Church, Cupertino, CA

Text: John1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life and the life was the light of all people. ⁵**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**

TEXT:Psalm 31:1-22

¹In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

²Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.

⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

⁶You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.

⁷I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,
⁸and have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.

¹¹I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
¹²I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
¹³For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

⁴But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, “You are my God.”
¹⁵My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.
¹⁷Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD,
for I call on you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.

¹⁸Let the lying lips be stilled
that speak insolently against the righteous
with pride and contempt.

¹⁹O how abundant is your goodness
that you have laid up for those who fear you,
and accomplished for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of everyone!

²⁰In the shelter of your presence you hide them
from human plots;
you hold them safe under your shelter
from contentious tongues.

²¹Blessed be the LORD,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was beset as a city under siege.

²²I had said in my alarm,
“I am driven far from your sight.”
But you heard my supplications
when I cried out to you for help.

It is overwhelming...can you feel it? It is life depleting ...can you sense it?

Here is a person, the psalmist, who is caught up in the waves of depression. His life is no longer his own as his eyes are bloodshot and sore from crying and his body and soul are wringed lifeless from grieving. He has no strength. His years of misery, his day in and day out depression has now caused his body to waste away even in his bones. He is ravaged by guilt real, or imagined, and his years and years of suffering might have begun just yesterday for time passes differently for him now as he is not able to sense the world as he once did.

He is convinced that no one wants him alive and he is totally isolated, tied up in the anxiety of his own mind. His neighbors don't want to be with him for his poisonous sorrow is too much to be near.

Eventually, the psalmist fears for his life. Whether this fear is real or imagined doesn't really matter, the pain this person is suffering is very real either way.

Do you know the feeling? Do you know that ready to give up feeling?

This is the last straw, the final blow to all that the poet is suffering, he feels abandoned by God as his depression cuts him off from the last vestige of hope he had tucked away in his pocket.

I know how he feels. Depression is that darkness that overtakes and swallows me up... where even a hand in front of my face is blotted out and the stiffness of my eyes makes me strain to see what I can't. It is blindness to all things happy and deafness to all things joyful. Depression is that place where all my effort goes to drawing that next breath and I wonder is it worth the effort at all? With razor-like precision depression severs the links between my suffering and my family and friends so that speech becomes just too arduous and explanations just too tiring. Depression is the intense anxiety churning away at my insides as the deathly still silence covers the surface.

You may not have had Major Depression, or maybe you have but I'll venture to say that you have known fear like this. That terror that you will lose your job; the late night phone ringing when your teenager is out after curfew, noticing your partner is forgetting things more than he used to.

But...it is at this point, there appears for the psalmist a pin-hole of light in the darkness of his depression; some tiny intrusion into the blackness he has grown accustomed to. Can you see it? Do you see the beam in the darkness? It isn't new. No, it has always been there. But now by the grace of God this bedraggled, downtrodden, at-the-end-of-his-rope person can see it. For the first time this suffering soul whose eyes were dry from crying out all his tears, whose body was wasting away, and whose spirit was broken in isolation can see this tiny beam shining into his blackened world.

The light is the grace of God...the miracle is that now the psalmist notices it.

The psalmist has been given a warm ray of grace from God that is breaking him out of his misery and cutting through the darkness of his soul.

In John's gospel it says, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." So back in the very beginning...the beginning of all of this...the beginning of all of us...even then the darkness did not overcome the light. From the moment the Word was with God and the Word was God and God said, "Let there be light"...there has always been light and there has been darkness. The darkness can never extinguish the light...that's not just in the physical world, in night and day and sun, moon and stars, that is in us, in our lives, in our very souls. The darkness you may be feeling around Christmas, whether you feel a let-down after the holiday race or maybe the holidays were very different for you because of a hardship you have faced in the last year or so, no matter how dark it gets...no matter how bleak we feel...the darkness will never extinguish the light. That is the promise of Christmas. That is the promise of the Christ child. That is the promise of the indwelling light.

For thousands of years the promise of scripture has been that we will share in that grace. We will know that in-breaking light. We will share in the gift of God's grace to intrude upon our sorrow and pain.

I have experienced such grace. It was Christmas 2008, the holidays are the worst for me and I was in one of the two worst depressions I have ever experienced. My world was very much as the psalmist has felt. A seminary friend of mine invited me to the Christmas Eve pageant at her church. It was pouring rain and I got home to a dark and dreary apartment and was far from being able to sleep and I knew I needed to write. So, I lit a single candle, got out a notebook and began to write. All kinds of thoughts came pouring out of me like the rain outside my window. Some ridiculous things like a letter to my nephew apologizing for not seeing him grow up and other bits and thoughts that made me wonder what the folks who had jumped off the bridge might have thought when they got depressed at Christmas time. And I just kept writing and writing and I filled a notebook just as the sun was coming up on Christmas morning. I suddenly felt very tired, I could hardly sit up or see straight so I decided to go to bed and sleep a while. What an amazing few hours. It was a grace-filled sleep...one of those deep, undisturbed and peaceful sleeps that happen to me very rarely. That was my pin hole of light...that few hours of sleep was the grace of God. But, it wasn't just the sleep. That interlude interrupted my darkness. That sleep, that powerful sabbatical from my torment got me out of that place that had consumed me for the all those days and hours before. My depression was still there and in a few days I entered a hospital and was successfully treated for it...but the crisis was averted by some much needed peaceful rest...rest in the form of the grace of God. The darkness had not overcome the light.

The psalmist knew of this grace of God and his writing is telling us to look for that pin hole of light...that beam of grace...it is always there. When you're in the thick of it, it doesn't seem possible. It doesn't seem that anything or anyone can help. But I am telling you, the psalmist is telling you and The Word is telling you that the darkness cannot stand against the light. The healing happens when because of the grace of God we can spy the pin-hole and see that beam of light.

The grace is the light...the miracle is that we notice it.

The Psalmist knew that...and we can know that too. In the meantime, in the waiting, in the terrible, awful waiting, this church will stand with you. This is what a faith community does for each other...we open our hearts to each other, share our pain with each other. When we're afraid, when we're sad, when we're just plain lost, we receive God's grace in the support and caring and love that comes in the pin hole of light we give to each other. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it." That's a promise.

That was true at the moment of creation; that was true for the Psalmist; that was true for the Gospel of John, it was true on Christmas morning and it is true for each one of us right now. There is nothing so dark that the light of grace of God cannot break through... nothing.

Amen