

“Do We Ever Arrive?” 10-8-17 CHC

Psalm 19

Philippians 4-14

It was around 3 AM. Betty and I were staying on an island in the middle of Flathead Lake. No electricity. No indoor plumbing. I found myself on the deck staring at the stars, brilliantly reflecting the vastness and beauty of the universe. I understood the Psalmist; “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork”. I could not help but contemplate my finitude.

The bright lights of our cities obscure our view of the stars. It is called “light pollution”. Two-thirds of the people in our world live in large cities where the night sky is obscured. An organization, The International Dark-Sky Association is working to ease “light pollution”; glare, where light causes visual discomfort, sky-glow, lights of the city diminishing the eye’s ability to see the stars, light trespass, light falling where not needed or intended, and clutter, excessive groupings of light sources (Homiletics, September-October, 2017, p.46-7).

They are designating Dark-Sky locations. Glacier National Park in Montana is one of them. There are programs offered that bring people together around midnight to stargaze. Isn’t it ironic that in order for us to see the stars we have to turn out the lights? How easily we miss the bigger picture of God’s universe, blinded by the surrounding artificial light. I saw something that early morning that I had not seen nor paid much mind.

I began to ponder this as a metaphor for the journey of faith. When in my life things have been the darkest, God has become more visible. Enfolded by the expanse of the starlit universe I was humbled, reminded that I am not the center of the universe. Brought to my knees by people and events I could not control, face to face with the limitations of myself, but willing to look beyond myself in faith to a God I cannot see, the light slowly emerged. Someone asked a good question; “Is there an advantage to letting some things in our lives go dark for a while so that we can see and experience even greater things in ourselves and in our world?” Could it be that we may need darkness to see light? (Homiletics, p.47).

I think of what happened in Las Vegas. An act only the deepest darkness of the human heart could produce is met with an outpouring of human compassion. A GoFundMe campaign has already raised 3.5 million dollars. Blood donations have exceeded need. Volunteers are showing up with water and snacks for those waiting. Clark County said that “Shows of support have been amazing and greatly appreciated. First responders have enough items to deal with immediate need”.

Monday evening the Las Vegas City Hall hosted a prayer vigil to honor the slain. As images from the scene show, people bow their heads in silence listening to religious and city leaders direct their attention to a transcendent source beyond them. As the event closes, music and singing breaks out. I can hear the prayer of the Psalmist on their lips, “But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!” (Psalm 22:19).

The light shining in the darkness is a theme in John's gospel; "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). Paul is speaking to us as a person who needed the darkness to see the light of Christ.

Paul, on his way to Damascus, is blinded by "a light from heaven" (Acts 9:3). Believing that he is acting in the light persecuting Christians, Jesus appears with a question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul responds, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply comes, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). For three days he is blind before sight is restored.

Pride and an extended ego may blind us. Success and affluence may do so as well. Paul's sense of self-confidence, his zeal by the righteousness of the Jewish law, by which he felt justified, are, in the light of Christ, considered "rubbish". Rubbish in relation to what? We have our own markers for self-righteousness and justification.

Listen to how Paul frames it. "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the flesh; as to righteousness under the law blameless...Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ".

Thomas A Kempis put it this way; "A humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning". In the light of Jesus Christ Paul sees himself for who he really is. So he says that the loss of what has defined him is now rubbish, "in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith".

What leads him to Christ is not his deep learning, but a new-found self-knowledge. The whole orientation of his life changes as he passes through his self-imposed darkness into the light of Christ.

John Calvin reflects on the mystery of this faith passage in life. He writes, "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other" (Calvin's Institutes).

What Paul now says is that "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead". We see in Paul a new humility before God in faith and practice.

What is central is his relationship to the righteousness of Christ by which he now sees himself justified. It is in the darkness of his life and soul that Paul beholds Jesus, "the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16). We see the stars in the darkness.

Former Vice President Joe Biden frequently acknowledges that faith alone has enabled him to endure the untimely death of his son, Beau. In a September talk show, Biden tells the host that his wife, Jill, taped an expression from philosopher Soren Kierkegaard to their mirror: "Faith sees best in the dark".

What seems humanly impossible, what we cannot understand, those times when we can discern no light shining in our personal darkness, faith can see God. Jesus tells his disciples, "But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them" (John 11:10).

The "bright morning star" of Christ's light shines in our darkness, perceived only by faith. Perhaps the darkness lies in those zones of safety we construct to protect us from our dark thoughts, nights and emotions. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, "Learning to Walk in the Dark", observes that we think that if we could defend ourselves better, build a wall against the things that threaten us, then we would be secure.

Paul thinks he is secure in his Hebrew pedigree, proud and assured. But experience, as Paul reflects, demonstrates that he is mistaken. The real problem has to do with the resistance of his mind and heart to the reality of the living God. Taylor observes, "The suffering comes from our reluctance to learn to walk in the dark" (Homiletics, p.51).

Even as Paul grasps the light of Christ, he acknowledges that he is not there yet; "I do not consider that I have made it my own...but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead".

Flannery O'Connor writes, "When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in the darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty" ("Letter to Louise Abbot", in "The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor, Homiletics, p.51).

Once we let go of the temporal attachments that we allow to define us and embrace Christ by faith as the one who defines us, we find the light of his life, wisdom, and guidance through the dark paths of this world. We do not need to fear the periods of darkness in life. Through Christ "They are the atrium to new phases of life, the threshold to new experience, the invitation to move on from where you are to where there is more for you to learn" (Joan Chittister, "Light in the Darkness", Homiletics, p.51).

Paul says that he "presses on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind".

The realities of present circumstances in the life of FPC, two cultures in whitewater together, an aging congregation, diminishing resources with more needed from fewer, and a pastor head of staff yet to be identified, pose its own set of challenges and uncertainty.

This apparent present darkness may, through faith in Christ's leading, be the atrium to a new phase of life, the threshold of a new unveiling by God, an invitation to move on from where you are into new learning and life together. Think about that as you enter the theme of your Stewardship campaign, "Making a Difference".

It may be 3 AM in the morning, but the stars are shining in the darkness. We may be finite, but Christ is infinite.