

From Darkness to Light- mini-sermon preached at TUMC

Feb. 21, 2016

Gn 15:1-12, 17-18; Ps 27; Lk 13:31-35, 9:37-43a; Phil 3:17-4:1

On this second Sunday in Lent, the lectionary passages all speak of a time of darkness and fear, but also of finding light and hope in that darkness. This theme of light and dark is present throughout scripture. God's very first creative act in Genesis (1:2-4) was to bring light into a dark and formless void. This continues right to the final scenes in Revelation when darkness is completely banished as God comes to dwell on earth, "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (21:23).

The Bible sees a parallel between light and dark and good and evil. Darkness represents sin and confusion, sorrow and death. Light brings joy, God's presence and blessing, and revelation, the revelation of God's love in Christ. Christ refers to himself as the "light of the world" (Jn. 8:12). In the introduction to John's Gospel, which I love reading in the dark of our Christmas Eve services, John says, "What has come into being in [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4-5).

My brother Steve lives in Edmonton and his favourite day of the year is Dec. 21, the winter solstice, as the nighttime darkness reaches its maximum extent, and then the days begin to lengthen. I too like to follow the lengthening of the days, minute by minute as we creep out of the darkest of days. Some have suggested that Christmas is celebrated around that time to underline Christ's light coming into the world at its darkest time.

Despite that light there is still much darkness around us.

The news from the Middle East is deeply disturbing. 500,000 Syrians have died in the current conflict and four million have now fled their homeland. And another four million have been displaced internally. That means almost half the population of a once-prosperous developing country has been made homeless. Displacement, starvation and death are rampant. Those attempting to provide some relief within the country, or neighbouring countries, or further afield, are feeling overwhelmed.

Another 3 million people have been displaced in Iraq in the last two years alone by the continued bombing and conflict in that country. On top of all the death and destruction they have experienced in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the first Gulf War in 1990, the second war in 2003, and the U.S. led occupation and the insurgency thereafter. Iraq is much on my mind as this winter marks the 10th anniversary of the kidnapping of four members of the Christian Peacemaker Team delegation in Baghdad. Netflix has commissioned a documentary film series on kidnappings. They are including this CPT kidnapping as one of the episodes. The film-makers will be interviewing me next Sunday and so I have been immersing myself in that story again. It is not an easy story to revisit. And it has been difficult to explain to secular, worldly film-makers why one would risk one's life on a peace-making mission. But Netflix plays in 130 countries and so it is an opportunity to speak our truth of the power of nonviolence and love of enemies to a very large audience.

And Afghanistan. Until this year's upsurge of violence in Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan had been the world's largest source of refugees, year after year - for 32 years in a row! At the moment there are 3.7 million Afghans displaced internally or to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Today's reading from Psalm 27

takes me right back to Afghanistan too. When I was asked by CPT to go to Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, I was uncertain and fearful. But in praying about it I had a sense of Jesus' very real presence, pointing me to this very psalm, Ps. 27. The psalm's opening verse is "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" That light and that strength sustained me through that perilous trip to Afghanistan.

Is there any light today? Indeed, there is. Neighbouring countries in the Middle East, and the United Nations, have done an amazing job in sheltering these millions of refugees despite the many difficulties and costs. European nations have also done an amazing job and have taken in more than a million refugees in the last year alone. Even Canada has finally responded and so far we have welcomed 22,000 Syrian refugees. This has been a truly inspiring community effort with hundreds of groups coming together spontaneously to raise funds and offer friendship. TUMC's sponsorship of a refugee family has also attracted substantial donations from folks outside of our congregation who want to be a part of bringing some light into the darkness. "We ourselves [might] feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But," as Mother Teresa said, "the ocean would be less because of that missing drop."

In the past two years we in our congregation have also learned about the darkness of human trafficking. The UN estimates that 2-3 million people are trafficked in a year. It generates 32 billion\$US/yr in revenue, making it one of the fastest growing activities of international criminal organizations. Most of these people are trafficked for sexual purposes or for forced labour. Widespread poverty and globalization have contributed to the rise in human trafficking. I even came across trafficked Philipinos enslaved as domestics and labourers in northern Iraq. Those who escape from their traffickers are often left with long-term trauma in addition to their continuing poverty.

Into this darkness we at TUMC hope to bring a tiny bit of light with the imminent opening of Aurora House. This is a whole new area of ministry for us and we will have much to learn. But the need is urgent. You have been generous in response to this new vision brought to us two years ago by our visioning task force. We hope and pray that this house may be a healing place for survivors of human trafficking and also a means of high-lighting and countering this scourge of modern slavery.

In introducing the ministry of Jesus, the apostle Mathew quoted the prophet Isaiah saying, "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." (Mt. 4:16). All of us, apart from Christ, are in darkness, in the region and shadow of death. Finding Christ, we come into the light of his eternal salvation. This church is one of the places where that promise is proclaimed, where one can explore its implications for our earthly lives, where one can find friendship and support in seeking to live it out. In renovating this building, at some considerable cost, we hope to make our church more accessible and more inviting, so that others might be drawn towards the light of Christ as well, and escape the darkness all around. The renovated physical space of course is only part of the welcome we hope to offer. Our worship, friendship, congregational life, Christian education, and service opportunities are an integral part of that welcome. But for now we are putting a concerted effort into the physical space, convinced that this is God's calling. Again you have been faithful and generous in response to that call.

In conclusion, I see light in the darkness as we prepare to welcome a refugee family, as we prepare a shelter for survivors of human trafficking, and as we renovate our worship and meeting spaces. I have appreciated being a part of these enlightening initiatives over the past four years. As we heard earlier from the beginning of John's gospel, "What has come into being in [Christ] was life, and the life was the

light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4-5).  
Thanks be to God, our light and our salvation. Amen.