

## **When Darkness Follows Light: Incoming TUMC Board Chair half-sermon**

Tim Schmucker, 21 Feb 2016

Humans of New York is a blog and bestselling book featuring street portraits and interviews collected on the streets of New York City. Started just five years ago by photographer Brandon Stanton, Humans of New York has developed an incredibly large following through social media – currently over 20 million followers. No doubt many of us read Brandon’s daily posts on Facebook featuring the joys and sorrows, the hopes and hopelessness of human life.

One such story is that of a not-so-young-anymore cellist who said: “I’ve been trying to get into a full time orchestra for the past 20 years. I’d guess I’ve been to over 200 auditions. It can be pretty heartbreaking. I tried out for the New York Philharmonic four times.” Then came his big break – an invitation from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. “I prepared three months for the ... audition, flew all the way across the country, and ... and ... they cut me off after twelve seconds.”<sup>1</sup>

Hope, followed by dejection. Darkness follows light. That’s not the way it’s supposed to be. We prefer stories where light emerges out of darkness, right? Yet that’s not how it always goes.

Closer to home is the story of Canadian Mennonite University peace and conflict studies professor and author Jarem Sawatsky, who at the pinnacle of his academic career in 2014, had to resign due to being diagnosed with a fatal disease called Huntington's. Huntington’s Disease causes the progressive breakdown and degeneration of nerve cells in the brain, leading to physical, emotional and cognitive incapacitation. As Jarem describes it, it’s “a combination of Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and Schizophrenia.”<sup>2</sup> Darkness follows light.

In our lectionary scripture passages for today, this the second Sunday of Lent, both Abram and Jesus experience darkness following light, hopelessness emerging out of hope.

In Genesis 15, Abram – the patriarch of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – and his wife Sarai are childless, a virtual death sentence in ancient times. However, Abram receives with joy the Lord’s promise that their descendants shall be counted as the stars. Verse 6: “And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Yet then in the middle of what ought to have been a joy-filled covenant-making ceremony, hopelessness overwhelms Abram. 12 “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.” Darkness followed light.

Similarly, Jesus in Luke 13 is on his way to Jerusalem; he’s meandering south from Galilee through Samaria and into Judea, teaching, healing, and disputing with the religious leaders. He’s at the height of his ministry. In our gospel passage for today, some Pharisees

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/post/89959723966/ive-been-trying-to-get-into-a-full-time>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jaremsawatsky.com/facing-elephants/>

come to him to warn him that Herod wants to kill him. Before we hear Jesus' response, we have to understand that Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler of Galilee, was a jerk of a man and an incompetent ruler. He sent his first wife away in order to marry his sister-in-law and niece. Sounds sketchy at best. This is the same Herod who had John the Baptist decapitated, and who had his daughter dance shamefully in public. Unsavory and unscrupulous puppet ruler. Yet, he was to be feared as he had much power.

But Jesus, full of confidence, strength and defiance, challenges Herod. Verse 31ff: "Go and tell that fox." Calling Herod "that fox" is an insult – it has nothing to do with slyness – for a fox is an unclean animal in the Israelite holiness codes. Jesus was calling a spade a spade, naming Herod as the worthless, slanderous, treacherous ruler he was. Go tell that fox for me. Tell him, here I am in public, healing and teaching. I'll be here today and tomorrow. You know where to find me. Kill me if you dare. Courageous words. Truth-telling in strength and defiance.

Yet, immediately after in verse 34 Jesus becomes despondent over Jerusalem, weeping over the beloved city/people "that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." Jesus despairs in his yearning "to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Tears follow courage, hopelessness emerges out of hope. Darkness follows light.

As your new Board Chair, I've thought about our pastor Marilyn's words that this year 2016 is to be an "implementation" year. After the past several years of visioning and planning – representing 100s if not thousands of hours of work by you all, this year Aurora House will open, and we occupy our more welcoming, accessible and functional space here at 1774 Queen. We'll also be receiving a refugee family or two, helping them start a new life after fleeing the horrors of the wars in the Middle East. As a congregation, we are vibrant and faithful, courageous and confident. Like Abram, we are covenant-making with the Lord, in this our light-filled implementation year.

Yet, reading the lectionary passages for this second Sunday of Lent gives me pause as I ponder our implementation year ahead. I think of a Colombian wisdom proverb "entre dicho y hecho hay mucho trecho," meaning "There is a long trek between saying and doing." Or for us today, it's a long road from visioning through to implementation. So let's not be surprised if implementation doesn't always go smoothly; let's expect glitches. And we've already experienced some of these. The numerous delays in construction of our building's addition due to unexpected complications. The Aurora House facility is ready to go, but sustainable program funding is not. Now I firmly believe we can have full confidence in the leadership of our building committee and in the governance of the Aurora House board. Still, the scripture passages for today tell us that sometimes darkness follows light.

And it's not just bricks, mortar and programs that we need to implement. Our life as a congregation is even bigger. If we take a step back, we face even larger challenges. What does it mean to be a community of Jesus-followers in a multi-cultural, post-Christian context? What does it mean "to believe in God" in a time of exploding discoveries of quantum mechanics? Karl

Barth, the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian suggested that "we must read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other," but now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I wonder how we read the Bible with Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time" also in hand? How do we articulate our faith and our life together in these times?

Marilyn, in her sermon last week for the first Sunday in Lent, talked about the wilderness as a deeply crucial part of Jesus' moving from his baptism to his ministry of proclaiming the year of Jubilee: liberation for the oppressed, the blind, the prisoners. First was the wilderness where Jesus learned radical dependence on God, and on the Holy Spirit who would guide and sustain him. The wilderness, Marilyn said, cannot be skipped over. She went on to say that this wilderness experience is "the agony part of love." I think we can paraphrase her and say that the wilderness experience is the agony part of vision's implementation. Or to return to today's theme, we say that darkness following light is that same agony of implementation.

Of course all metaphors and images have their limitations. "Wilderness," "from darkness to light," and "when darkness follows light" all imply linear experience. Perhaps a more accurate description would be that we encounter and experience both darkness and light together.

In any case, the good news today is that when darkness follows light, we are not alone. Following the deep and terrifying darkness that descended upon Abram, the Lord continued covenant-making with him, saying, "to your descendants I give this land." Jesus, both in the wilderness last week and in his despondency over Jerusalem today, found the fortitude to face his trials. God's Spirit stayed with them. We too have that strength to face the challenges this implementation year will surprise us with. Our deeply rooted faith, the depth of our congregational wisdom, and our ever-renewing spiritual journey will give us the strength and wisdom to meet the darkness that follows light.

Jarem Sawatsky, the Canadian Mennonite University professor slowly dying of Huntington's Disease, experienced much darkness following light. Yet, just this past July he began a blog where he reflects on losing his cognitive and physical capacities. In his deeply moving reflections on life, he explores how peacebuilding and mindfulness insights might help those of us facing chronic disease and dementia. He also shares profound musings on finding contentment and enjoying life in the midst of significant limitations. The blog is entitled "Dancing with Elephants: A Beginners Guide to Losing Your Mind."<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, it's a blog about being human - a fragile way of being for all us. In his darkness, Jarem has shown us a way toward the light.

So when darkness follows light we will remember that we aren't alone, that our faith and the Spirit guide us and give us strength. When darkness follows light we will remember that light also follows darkness. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jaremsawatsky.com/dancing.blog>