

Let us pray:

There but for the Light of God go you.

There but for the Light of God go I.

Amen

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined (Isaiah 9:2).”

In my own prayerful struggle with God’s Word, I wanted to stay with Isaiah’s powerful words of light and hope. It is the season of Epiphany, after all, we are supposed to celebrate God’s Light; God’s Light made Flesh that is “with us” and “works through us.” At this time of year we need to hear about the Light. As a community we are experiencing the shortest days of the year, it is cold and more often, then not, storm clouds hide the sun. We are literally up to our waists in snow. “Dear Lord, I know that I need to hear about your Light!!” **But** there was one word from our Biblical texts this Sunday that kept hounding me. That word was “darkness.” Yes “darkness,” and it has been my experience that those Biblical words that nag and nibble at the soul are the very words that God wants me to consider.

I would rather not preach on “darkness.” I would prefer to preach about fishing for woman and men, or better yet, just go fishin. Well, maybe ice fishing.

What if I had used these words for my prayer at the beginning of this sermon?

There but for the Darkness of God go you.

There but for the Darkness of God go I.

I don’t know about you, but hearing and speaking these words unsettles my sensibilities. Spiritually and linguistically, more often than not, the image of light is **good** and the image of darkness is **bad**.

In the Christian Century, the biblical scholar Marcus Borg says this about the words light and darkness: *“The symbolism of light and darkness is ancient, archetypal and cross cultural. It has many rich resonances of meaning. Darkness is associated with blindness, night, sleep, cold, gloom, despair, loss, chaos, death, danger, and yearning for the dawn. **It is a striking image of the human condition.** Light is seen as the **antidote** to the above, and is thus an image of salvation. In the light, one is awake, able to see and find one’s way; it is associated with relief and rejoicing that the night is over; in the light one is safe and warm. In the light there is life.”*

It is easy to spiritually speak about being “in” and lead “by” the light, but how can we spiritually speak about being “in” and lead “by” the darkness without being accused of being a member of a cult involved in devil worship? We have only to look at the great mystical tradition of Christianity to understand that there is a spiritual darkness that is a necessary part of our Christian pilgrimage. We have only to examine the life of the greatest mystical teacher, Jesus, to discover that his own spiritual life was rooted in a holy darkness.

We know in the Gospel of Matthew, just before the call of the first disciples, *“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (4:1)”* Indeed, the wilderness invokes the images of darkness, thirst, emptiness, loneliness, chaos, and mystery. The wilderness is a place of silence and solitude.

Let us imagine that the wilderness is a metaphor for Jesus' spiritual experience of the night. Jesus, prompted by the Spirit, freely turns towards this wilderness. In hunger and thirst, Jesus freely accepts **his finite human condition**, and finds the power of God through the dark night of chaos, emptiness, and loneliness. Jesus can say no to evil, because he freely accepts the **limits of his humanity** and allows the power of the Spirit to reign. Rooted in the dark soil of his humanity, Jesus can face the risky business of obeying the Spirit's call and proclaim, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* (Matt. 4:17). In the first lines from today's Gospel we hear that Jesus has come to know that John the Baptist has been arrested, and if I may be so blunt, he gets out of Dodge and **high tails it** to the north country of Galilee. A healthy spirituality can be pragmatic.

Ever since his birth, Jesus has been on the move fleeing the evils of the Roman Empire and its minions. His time had not yet come for his arrest and death. There was Kingdom work to be done. The Kingdom of God had come near in Jesus, and the Spirit's nearness comes alive in Jesus' courage and faith.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton artfully describes the human condition that grounds this faith, and the courage that propels it forward:

*"But when the time comes to enter the darkness in which we are naked and helpless and alone; in which we see the insufficiency of our greatest strength and the hollowness of our strongest virtues; in which we have nothing of our own to rely on, and nothing in our nature to support us, and nothing in the world to guide us or give us light - then we find out whether or not we live by faith."* New Seeds of Contemplation

The Kingdom of Heaven had come near in Jesus, and the disciples immediately responded to his call "to follow." Why so quick a response? Maybe they were acquainted in some way with John the Baptist. Maybe they had seen and heard about Jesus. I can live with both possibilities. We know from the Gospels that many *"were astounded at Jesus teaching, because he spoke with authority."* (Luke 4:32) I believe that Jesus' authority came from a spiritual presence emptied of the trappings of human ego and power. In a word, Jesus was not out for himself, or full of himself. He was not a spiritual charlatan that demanded to be first, have special privileges or rule over those who were put in his care. Jesus did not preach his agenda, but came to do the will of his Father. The Kingdom of Love had come near in Jesus, and people knew it; they knew it and they followed him.

In his book A Ray of Darkness, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes:

*"Once (we say) there was a man who was seen and heard as someone naked to the mystery of God in life and death. Once there was a man who lived in what seemed to be exceptional closeness to the **disruptive darkness of God**, to the extent that he assumed the right to speak for God-for God's kingdom.... (102-103)."*

Simple fisherman, at the bottom of the pecking order, followed him. *"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people (Matt. 4:23)."* Jesus was not above and beyond the people he served. He knew the poverty of his people, because he had come face to face with the limits of his own humanity. Jesus healed others out of his own emptiness, and the healing waters of the Spirit flowed freely.

**The limits of our humanity are not evil.** Jesus has taken on the limits of our humanity, and there is **glory** in the darkness of human being and becoming. The disruptive darkness of God can be experienced as spiritual dryness, thirst, loneliness, yet these experiences till the dark soil of our humanity, and there

is new life, hope, and beauty resting in the darkness. Wendell Berry captures this hope and beauty when he poetically writes:

The seed is in the ground.  
Now may we rest in hope  
While darkness does its work.

If we believe that Jesus was the Humanly Divine witness to the Kingdom of God, then we need not be afraid of the limits of our humanity, and can find the power of God in those things that unsettle, challenge, and sometimes fracture our lives. If we do not pretend that we are **almighty**, and freely accept the limits of our humanity, then we can be open to receive the grace and gift of faith. We need not fear God's holy darkness, because I truly believe that God will give us the courage not to flee from, or cover over our vulnerabilities.

When it comes to living a Christ centered life, God does not promise us a "rose garden," but the Spirit does promise us a joy and a peace that surpasses all understanding. This I believe.

As living members of Christ's Body, we are heirs to a holy dark space, carved out by the Spirit of the living God. It is in this holy space that a **healing room** is made for others. This healing room has a name over its door. This godly room is called compassion, and the healing wind of the Spirit **moves**, and enables us to suffer and share God's peace with others.

With God's own compassion, we become conduits for the healing wind of the Spirit.

Ours is a spiritual presence that bears witness to the reality that the Kingdom of God's love has come near. The Kingdom of God's love has come near, and our Christian authority is not about our causes, agendas, or the will to control. Our authority is rooted in doing the will of the One who sent us. As part of Christ Body, each of us is an expression of the Light that shines forth from a holy darkness. We have only to "**let it shine.**" We have only to let it shine on others.

Now, I don't pretend to be an expert when it comes to prayer. Yet, there is one prayer that follows me, and is a light that guides me each day. If I am mindful, and often I'm forgetful, I ask God to allow me to simply do his will. I ask God to allow me to be open and vulnerable, so that the power of God can be with others in their sorrows and joys.

Dear Lord, **I want your passion.** I want your boundless love to follow me, and let your Light guide my feet. Your kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.