

Out of Darkness

Mark 9:2-9

INTRODUCTION

Wednesday, February 1, 1978, was the darkest day of my life. Exactly one week earlier, during the night of Wednesday, January 25 and into Thursday, January 26, it started to snow. And it snowed. And it snowed. That snow culminated in what we now call the “Blizzard of 1978.”

By the time the snow stopped, Huntington IN where I was a sophomore in college was buried under 17” of new snow on top of the snow that was already on the ground. That Wednesday in January was the last day of class for the J-Term semester. The next day – Thursday – was to be our final exam. We never took that exam. Exams were canceled, and we were all awarded an “A.”

More importantly, all of our plans to go home for a long weekend before the start of the second semester were canceled as well. No one was going anywhere. It would be late Sunday afternoon – four days later – before my dad and his four wheel drive pickup could make the 30 mile drive from our home in Van Buren IN to the campus.

Tuesday, January 31st was the day I planned to move back into my dorm room. I did. I also bought my textbooks for the second semester. But I could not stand the thought of spending one more night in that dorm room, so I went back home.

The next morning I drove back up to campus and started classes. Before I left the house that day I went into Mom and Dad’s bedroom and gave my mom a goodbye kiss. She was still in bed. That was very unusual. I told her I loved her, and headed back to school.

At about 11 p.m. that night there was a knock on my dorm room door. I was already in bed, so I ignored it at first, thinking it was some of the guys in my hall goofing off. But the knocking persisted, and it kept getting more forceful with each knock. I jumped out of bed, and swung the door open, ready to confront whatever dorm mate was creating the ruckus.

I was shocked to see my Dad standing there. And my brother. And my little sister. All four of them were crying. That’s when I learned that my 42-year-old mother died just a few hours earlier. Unbeknownst to any of us, the cancer she had five years before then – the cancer that we were confident she had beaten – had come back and had consumed her entire insides.

Two weeks after her death would have been the celebration of her fifth anniversary cancer free. And at 19½ years old, I was plunged into the darkest period of my young life.

It took many years before I found my way out of that pit. No experience I've had since – and as many of you know, I've experienced some significant ones – has come close to the darkness of those days.

A similar kind of darkness is the backdrop to today's Gospel lesson. The disciples' lives are shrouded in it. It even shrouded the life of Jesus. If you miss the darkness, you can't fully understand the majesty of what we read in today's Gospel lesson. Let me explain.

Everything had been going great for the Twelve. In the weeks preceding what we read today they had witnessed several awe inspiring events: the feeding of the 5,000, the feeding of the 4,000, Jesus walking on the water, the healing of a man who was both deaf and mute and the healing of another man who was blind. Their fires were stoked when they responded correctly to that great question of Jesus:

“Who do you think I am?”

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” (Matthew 16:13-16)

Flip the pages of your Bible back and read these stories. Incredible, wonderful, high energy and excitement. The disciples were having the time of their lives. But in a moment all that enthusiasm suddenly turned to darkness as Jesus introduced a new teaching.

(Jesus) began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this ... (Mark 8:31-32a)

If that weren't dark enough, the darkness got even darker when Peter objected to this teaching, only to be harshly rebuked by Jesus:

“Get behind me, Satan!” (Jesus) said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Mark 8:33)

Rebukes like that cast a pretty dark shadow. Our text for today day tells us that rebuke happened six days ago.

After six days ... (Mark 9:2)

Less than a week. A long week. A sad, frightening week. A dark week. All of the joy in following Jesus had been replaced by the news of His impending suffering and death.

Moreover, it was clear from what Jesus had taught that the days were only going to get darker. It was going to get much worse. When we read how Matthew and Luke describe the events in our text, they make it clear that this reality was weighing heavily on Jesus too. All 13 of them needed to see some light.

Let me remind you of a verse in today's second reading:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," is the (same God) who has cascaded his light into us ... (2 Corinthians 4:6, TPT)

When the darkness gets that thick, the only cure is to see the light of God. To have God's light "cascade" into us. Only the light of God could break through that thick darkness and prepare them for the even darker days ahead. And it happened! In the wonderful and totally mysterious event described in our story for today, God broke through the darkness and cascaded His light.

#1: HE REVEALED HIS GLORY

Verses 2-3:

There (Jesus) was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. (Mark 9:2-3)

Jesus experienced it personally but Peter, James and John got to see it firsthand! All the elements of God's glory and majesty converge in this story:

- They are on a mountain
- The bright lights shine
- There is a voice speaking from the heavens
- The appearance of Jesus changes It's a powerful statement being made.

God often moves in this very sort of majestic way.

- Moses experienced a burning bush that wasn't actually on fire.
- Isaiah experienced a vision of flying angels in the sanctuary.
- The Apostle Paul saw a light so bright it knocked him off his horse.
- But as Elijah discovered, it isn't always the big and powerful. He had to learn to become still so he could hear a quiet, gentle voice.

However it happens, the truth is the same. When His people are in darkness, He will break through with His light!

#2: HE PROVIDED OTHER FAITHFUL PEOPLE

Verse 4:

And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9:4)

The appearance of these two faithful men have been the basis for countless theological discussions. Your commentaries are filled with opinions. We know that ...

- Moses is the guy we associate with the giving of the Law
- Elijah was the first and the greatest of all the Prophets
- The Law and the Prophets form the bulk of the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament
- Both of these guys had mysterious circumstances surrounding their death.

Luke tells us what they talked about: They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:31) They talked to him about the darkness that was ahead. These lives of these two men set the stage for what Jesus was about to do. They apparently encouraged Him and reminded Him of the overall plan of God.

Here's what I think we are supposed to gain from their appearance. The net result was a penetrating of the darkness. In the midst of dark times, when the darkness hinders our ability to see what God may be doing, God still has a purpose. There is still a plan. We need to hear that and to know it.

But here's the part I like the best: The reassurance came through people of faith. If we are open to receiving them, God will always send us someone to help us find our way through the darkness.

This seems to me to be the perfect place to remind you about our Stephen Ministry. It is a wonderful, confidential way in which this congregation helps to connect you with those people of faith who can walk you through the darkness you are experiencing. Many of us, and I was one, try to find our way alone, and because of that we linger in the darkness much longer than we need to.

#3: HE CALMED THEIR FEARS

Verses 5-6:

Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) (Mark 9:5-6)

Good ole Peter. Whenever he didn't know what to say, he said something stupid. But instead of another rebuke, these frightened men received a message that brought peace into their fearful hearts:

A voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7)

We know it calmed their fears because the men coming down the mountain were very different from the men who had climbed it moments ago. And they were most certainly different from the nine disciples who had been left to wait at the bottom of the mountain. Those men were arguing with the gathered crowd!

One devotional writer put it like this:

Experiencing the Light of God provides healing and comfort. Sadness, guilt, regrets, worry, and so on, can be washed away in its presence. When bathed in the Light it also helps us to see clearly, and we are filled with a peace that can lift us out of the darkest hole.

APPLICATION

In my darkest moment, and in all the dark moments since then, I've experienced all three of these gifts of God:

- In His wonderful mercy God reminded me over and over again that He was still with me, and that He had a plan for my life. It was during those days following my Mom's death that I came to love these words of Scripture:

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6)

- In those dark days, God also sent to me a number of godly people who poured themselves into me and helped me find my way through.
- And He replaced my fears and anxieties with His peace.

Every one of us will know periods of darkness in our lives. Some of you are in one right now. I pray that the words I've spoken today have broken through some of

that darkness and offered a sparkle of light. Today marks a turning point in our Christian calendar. These next seven weeks are meant to walk us through all the junk in our lives so that the power of Easter can transform us again.

Amen.