

When the Shadows Fall

Matthew 11:2-11

Introduction

In a blog on the ministry website of "Focus on the Family," Laurie Short wrote:

I got engaged when I was 42. But I didn't marry until I was 49. In between, a broken engagement left me with a former fiancé and an unused bridal gown. Not quite what I had imagined for my life.

When I finally did make it to the altar, I got a package deal. My husband came with a 6-year-old. Although his son was a gift to my 49-year-old self, dealing with the sensitivities of co-parenting was not part of the marriage I had envisioned.

My best friend was married right out of college. In fact, we have the same anniversary — 28 years apart. When all four of her kids were under the age of 7, her husband's insurance company took an unexpected nosedive. I was a witness to her tears as their nest egg was decimated. This family of six was forced to move into a two-bedroom apartment.

Another friend of mine married a youth pastor. After he was exposed in several instances of sexual abuse, my friend filed for a divorce and became a single mom. It took 13 years for her to be able to trust enough to marry again. Her new husband had to absorb the pain left by the former husband.

Those stories are not all that uncommon. There are, undoubtedly, many similar stories in this congregation today. I could share more than one from my own life.

- Most people have a vision about how their lives will play out. The sun is always shining in our dreams, so when the shadows fall, we are often caught off guard.
- As an example, I spoke to a woman recently who was living in one of our local homeless shelters. She told me that she never dreamed she would end up there.
- No one does. We always picture a life filled with sunshine and roses.

But as you know well, life does not always turn out the way we planned. Not even for Christians.

This Advent season we are building on the essential truth of the Christmas story; namely, that in a world filled with darkness God sent us Jesus, the Light of the World. We have been repeating one of the great prophecies of Isaiah:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

The Light of the World has come... the first time. At Christmas. But the shadows won't fully go away until He comes again.

- That second coming is the moment that sin, death and the devil are finally conquered.
- That's when there are no more shadows that will fall.

J. K. Alwood was a circuit riding preacher in my former denomination. While riding at night to his next preaching appointment, he was caught in a rainstorm. But when the morning light started to break, the rain stopped and he witnessed the most beautiful rainbow he had ever seen.

- This inspired him to write a hymn we know as "The Unclouded Day."

O they tell me of a home far beyond the skies,
 O they tell me of a home far away;
 O they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise;
 O they tell me of an uncloudy day.

No one is exempt from those cloudy days when the shadows fall. Even Jesus experienced them. And so did John the Baptist.

Once again in today's Gospel text we meet John the Baptist. This is the same man we met last week – the one who was found preaching in the desert:

Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. (Matthew 3:3)

Today we find John locked up in a prison cell. His life path had suddenly become filled with shadows. John ended up in this prison cell because he had the audacity to point out a sin in the life of a very powerful man – King Herod.

Pointing out sin was something John did often. It is what he was doing last week when we talked about him. John by nature had a very confrontational preaching style. You might remember that he described the religious leaders who came to hear him preach as:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? (Matthew 3:7)

So there he was – John the confronter – sitting in a shadow-filled prison cell awaiting his execution. As he waited, he would hear stories about Jesus – stories about Jesus being compassionate and doing compassionate things, like healing sick people, and restoring the sight to the blind. A very different approach than John's.

- And there in the shadow of a prison cell, John began to think.
- Perhaps, John thought, I was wrong about this Jesus fellow. Shouldn't the Messiah be preaching gloom and doom, too?
- If Jesus is the wrong guy, why am I here?
- And if He is the right guy, shouldn't I be out there on the front lines. After all, John thought, why should I – the forerunner of the Messiah – be sitting on death row if Jesus really was the One for whom we had been waiting?

- This prison sentence made no sense. His life wasn't supposed to turn out that way.

Perhaps you've been there. Perhaps you are there right now.

You come into this season of Advent, and you hear the pastors encourage you to "prepare" for the coming of the Christ child, Jesus the Light of the World. And instead you find yourself saying:

This is not what I had envisioned for my life. I am not where I thought I would be. Why are there shadows if the Light of the World has come? Lord, I don't understand.

I have good news. You are in the right place. It might feel like a prison cell, but it is in reality a place of incredible freedom. For when you come to that place, we will learn the same valuable lessons John the Baptist learned.

LESSON #1: THE LIGHTED PATH OF GOD ALWAYS INCLUDES A FEW SHADOWS

Shadows are those moments when your faith is developed.

- It is in the shadows you learn to trust in God.

A football coach will tell his team:

From victory we learn little, from defeat everything." (Jeffrey Fry)

God's goal is to get us to a place of complete and total trust in Him – a place where our lives also shine out as witnesses to the world around us ... so ...

- John's path included the shadow of a prison cell
- The straight path for the Apostle Paul also included a prison cell, but it also included a shadowy thorn in the flesh
- Daniel spent time in the shadow of a lion's den
- Jonah was in the belly of the whale – quite literally a dark place!

And the list goes on and on. And when the list is complete, your name will be on it too. There is a beautiful verse in Ecclesiastes 7:

Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. (Ecclesiastes 7:13-14)

The English theologian G.K. Chesterton expressed concern that the people of his day were allowing the concerns of WW1 to cause them to stop believing in God rather than allowing God to show His power over the circumstances of the world.

Chesterton said, "It is often supposed that when people stop believing in God, they believe in nothing. Alas, it is worse than that. When they stop believing in God, they will believe in anything...and eventually that will lead to their destruction."

- "But now, by contrast, if I turn to the God of Scripture I will no longer be led by MY righteousness and holiness. Instead I will trust a God who is so holy and so righteous that my tendency will be to build my life around Him (rather than Him around me). I'll use His standards of right and wrong -- not mine. I'll build on His morality in my life -- not mine. I'll build on His expectations for me... not mine. AND I know if I trust in Him in these matters... I will be blessed."

LESSON #2: IN THE SHADOWS WE FIND ASSURANCE

From his prison cell John cried out to Jesus, and Jesus responded. Jesus did NOT say:

John's in prison? Oh no! Let me send an angel and get him out!

No, instead Jesus heard the concerns John expressed and had offered a short and sweet reply:

Go back and report to John what you hear and see ... (Matthew 11:4)

In other words, tell John everything is going according to plan. Jesus quotes Old Testament Scripture (specifically Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61) to reassure John that things are exactly as God has planned them:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. (Matthew 11:5)

One of my favorite travel experiences is to fly out when it is dark outside and watch as the plane climbs above the clouds. If you have ever done that, you know there is no darkness above the clouds. From God's perspective, it is all light.

- What you see as shadowy, God sees as light.
- Even in your shadow places, God remains in control.

As we turn to God with our concerns and questions, we find in Him the assurance we need for those crooked path moments.

APPLICATION

In Advent, we bring to God our shadowy places— all that real-life stuff that is not what we had planned on. We bring it to Him and He gives to us the assurance that we need for those moments. We build our lives around Him, trusting His path is the best path for our lives.

I have asked you to commit a verse of Scripture to memory to help lock in this year's Advent theme of "Shining Into the Darkness." Our verse this year is:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Let's repeat it together.

Amen