

2014_03_02 Transfiguration
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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A Light Shines in a Dark Place

2 Peter 1:16-21

INI

To you who have obtained like-faith by the righteousness of our God and Savior, grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

He wasn't only a Christian; he was a Lutheran pastor. He was the last person who should have this problem. He was a pastor who suffered from clinical depression. And this particular Good Friday that would be anything but good for him. He writes:

I was three months into being diagnosed with major clinical depression, and everything was a struggle. For three months I had tried to act like a pastor, even though I was on disability. I preached, taught Bible class, and was "around" far more than the fog in my brain should have let me. So it is that I found myself contemplating my own death on the day of the Lord's death. Contemplating, planning, expecting to die, if not that day, then very soon.

How did I get there? How did I get to the place where I would be considering that darkest of all escapes — suicide — on the day when we commemorate our Lord's death for us all?

He goes on:

Major depression strikes as many as one in ten people in America (Beers, *The Merck Manual, 18th Edition*) — probably more. It is a frightful disease of the mind, turning one inward, sucking out the very marrow of personality, until there is nothing left but darkness.

He was not only a Christian; he was a pastor. And he asks the question: how did this happen?

There is a perception we sometimes imagine about what it means to be a Christian. There is a perception that the life of a Christian should be a life of mountain top glory. It is to be a life filled with fulfillment and happiness. And when it is not, we sometimes wonder has gone wrong? We can become stuck ... stuck in dark place. How did this

happen? Surely, this is not how a Christian should feel or act. A Christian's life is blessed by God's favor, isn't it? The idea clouds about us: God simply is not pleased with me.

Peter steps into very experience – a journey from Mountain Glory to Valley Darkness. Peter stands breathless as he sees His Lord changed right before his eye. His face and clothes have taken on a shade of white that he never thought existed. Jesus is transfigured and His brightness is like the sun. Peter shades his eyes. And there next to Jesus appears two men, talking with him. He's caught up in mountain top glory – he's caught up in the excitement – here with Moses, Elijah, Jesus! In a rush of excitement Peter exclaims: "Let us make three tents here, that we may stay and worship." He really doesn't know what he is saying, but it just feels right. In breathless excitement, Peter wants to stay there, to worship Moses and Elijah and Jesus; he wants to stay there in that mountain of glory forever.

Peter wanted to stay. And who could blame him? Why would Jesus want to go back to His plain, ordinary status, to His humbled, weak fleshly form?

But they had to come down. Jesus knew what lay ahead. Jesus must come down from that mountain, return to earth and travel the dark road ahead. Our very lives depend upon it. He was God's beloved Son for this very reason – He chose the Father's will, the Father's calling; He chose humiliation and the road ahead was a dark one.

It would be a dark time for Peter too. How could this have happened to him? He was not just a Christian, he was an apostle, one of the chosen twelve. But so soon after that mountain top experience, he would fall to the depths darkness. He should be the last to have felt this way, to have acted this way. He said those words in haste, not thinking: "Even if all forsake you, even if I have to go to death with you Lord, I will not disown you." It was a darkness of self-trust that clouded his judgment. As the events unfolded, Peter would be blinded, blatant in his sins; he would forsake his Lord. Three times he would declare to others that he did not know him. Peter feels the darkness close in. He stands in the court yard, watching his Lord was shackled and escorted toward death, and he weeps in bitter sorrow. Peter had come down, way down from that mountain glory to a valley of darkness.

So dear Christians, what are the dark roads that you've been down? The life of a Christian is hardly mountain top glory. We too, face dark roads. Maybe you've already been there, maybe you're right in the middle of it, maybe it still lay in your future.

It was a dark road that Lutheran pastor went down. He admits, out of college, he thought of a bright future. He thought he could take on the world. So quickly a false expectation lets us down. Depression clouds out our sense of mountain top glory. All around it grows until a Christian finds himself stuck in a dark place. Compounded with sin, with guilt, it becomes a dark time. Sin has a way of laying hold of us; holding us down. It may be other people's sins against us. And often, it is our sins that we have buried within us. Guilt clouds about us. Whether you're a pastor or an apostle – Christians can find themselves stuck in darkness, unable to shake the feelings they shouldn't have and unable to feel the feelings they should be feeling; stuck – thinking things they shouldn't be thinking and unable to do the things they should be doing; they become stuck in what the psalmist calls: "the miry clay."

There is a perception that we sometimes give off or imagine about what it means to be a Christian. We give off this perception in expressions like: "cheer up!" ... "you need to trust God more!" ... or: "Just get over it!" There's a perception we imagine that the answer to spiritual struggles is to toughen up, to do something about it, to fix it – until we are surrounded by no one but ourselves. Lost in a cloud of Peter self-confidence, we are alone, looking from outside, to see our Lord shackled, carried off as a criminal. We're stuck.

But that was exactly the reason for our Lord to come down from the mountain. The path to the cross was the calling of God's beloved. For Jesus it was a path that led to the darkest of all places – hell. And yet this was just the purpose for which God had sent Him. It was to walk the dark road for you – a darker road, a deeper sorrow. He would choose to leave that mountain of glory and all the shining honor He deserved – He would leave it behind, that He might enter into the darkness of sin, the darkness of our sins, the dark place of the cross where sin's curse would become his own.

The Mount of Transfiguration was a shining promise. It was a promise of things to come. From that mountain we are able to gaze into the future, to see who this Jesus really is and to know that His suffering was for us. We see beyond – to a light, a brightness shining. Because beyond the cross shines a light. In that dark place, there yet shines a more glorious light. Jesus was God's beloved; he came down from that mountain and humbled Himself in our place; and God was well pleased ... so pleased that He lifted him out of the darkness, out of grave and raised Him up to an everlasting glory. From that mountain we gaze beyond the cross to see the brightness that dawns in our Lord's resurrection.

Peter, who had denied His Lord, who had faced that dark hour when all had forsaken Jesus – sees that light. He runs with haste to see it. He peers down into that grave and

sees it shining in an empty tomb. Jesus has risen. He is an eye witness of the glory, the hope, the redemption, his own redemption, your redemption. And so, as an Apostle who has gone through the darkness, Peter pens these words to you; words which you do well to heed as a light which shines in a dark place:

2 Peter 1:16–21

¹⁶ For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ¹⁷ For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." ¹⁸ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

The event of the Transfiguration was a promise; it was a glimpse into the future. And the Word of God is now enacting that same event. Each time we take up God's Word we are privileged to an event; a promise, a glimpse into the future.

Literally v.21: "Prophecy was never carried by the will of man, but holy men of God were carried by the Holy Spirit."

It is not open to individual opinion, mythologizing, or crafting for individual agendas – It is a light that shines from the Holy Spirit in these pages. It is a word, and nothing more. A promise of something to come.

The Transfiguration was a promise. It was a promise to Jesus and a promise to you of a glory to come. It is a promise that although a Christian may find himself in headed down a dark road, or stuck in a dark place, there is a light which shines. There is a glory beyond. But it is not ours. It does not belong to Moses or Elijah or Peter or me.

We are right to think that God is not well pleased with what is in me or what I am able to do on my own. If the Christian life is about how I need to "cheer up" ... "do more" ... or "just get over it" ... then truly God will never be pleased. For I just can never do these things in a way that shines with the glory of God. It is not in me to overcome sin, to get myself unstuck when stuck, to take away my own guilt.

Instead it is up to His Beloved. His Son. God was well pleased because Jesus did trust

God more, he did think the right things and do the right things. He came down from that mountain and He did it for you. God is well pleased with His Son because He came down from that mountain and went to that dark place for you. God is well pleased with His Son, and for that reason, He raised Him from the dead and has seated Him at His right hand, He seats Him here, where the Word meets the Church and His glory becomes yours.

In Christ God is well pleased – and He is well pleased with you. Not because you have done anything, but simply because Jesus is yours – His death is your death, His life is your life. God has given His beloved Son to you. He has taken away your guilt. He draws you here, to taste that He is good, to see a light shining in a dark place. Here as we approach the Lord’s altar, we approach the glory of His resurrection. This is the shining brightness of your redemption. For His sake, God has forgiven your sins and is well pleased with you. This is the light which shines in a dark place – promising God’s favor, promising good to come; a glimpse to that Mountain of Glory.

19 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;

Ash Wednesday is just 3 days away. We’ve come to the end of the Epiphany season. We’ve come to the culmination of Jesus’ epiphany: the revealing of the Christ, God’s own Son. We have stood atop that mountain; we have viewed the Christ in all His glory; we have seen the miracles, the transfiguration – this is God’s beloved Son indeed; And from here we come down, we head into the Passion season with hope. We head back into the week ahead with hope. No matter how dark a place we might be, God’s Word still shines, His prophetic word is firm, and the cross that we bear will lead to glory.

God did not want Peter to stay atop that mountain. The life of the Christian is not a life far off – in some ivory tower, on some mountain. It is right here. Down in the valleys. In dark experiences which cloud around us. This is where God goes with us and this is where God shines through.

In those dark times, God calls us to wait and look for His shining promises. To search the Word for answers. We wait for the morning star to dawn, for these promises to visit you in the dawn of a new day. We wait through those dark days, turning again and again back to that mountain, back to that voice, back to the beloved Son who speaks to us. We continue to gather in His presence and listen to His beloved Son. For in those moments of trembling, it is here where He speaks, where God’s Son reaches down with a human hand, to touch us and say: “Arise, do not be afraid.”

He wasn't only a Christian; he was a pastor. He was a pastor who suffered from depression. And he was also the pastor who was moved to bring his experience out of the darkness and into the light. He writes:

I would not give up my sickness today for anything in the world. God has used it to chasten me, change me, make me a better husband and father, and shape me as a better pastor. How is it that such suffering and pain can bring about so much good? Where is God in the darkness and the fog of what we so blithely call "depression" or "melancholy" or even "sadness"?

There is hope, no matter how dark the road. That hope is what this story is all about.

The pastor entitled his work: "I trust when dark my road" – based on the words of TLH 526 –

In God, my faithful God,
I trust when dark my road;
Though many woes o'ertake me,
Yet He will not forsake me.
His love it is doth send them
And, when 'tis best, will end them.

Wait. Hope. And see that light which shines from that mountain: Jesus transfigured, in all His glory, beyond the cross, beyond the grave; He is risen. Amen.