

To Those Who Sit in Darkness

Hespeler, 5 December 2021 © Scott McAndless – Advent 2

Malachi 3:1-4, [Luke 1:68-79](#), Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

In my line of work, as you can imagine, I will often come into contact with people who are going through rough times – who, to use the phrase that we read together this morning from the Gospel of Luke, **“sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”** Sometimes they tell me their stories or show me what they are going through in other ways. That is actually a great privilege, though it can be a hard one to bear. And often what they share with me is quite private and I honour their trust in me by keeping those things private.

So I won't give you any examples of this with any identifying details, but I am going to tell you that I have observed something. There has been more of that over the last several months. More people have been sitting in darkness that is deeper and more impenetrable. And the shadow of death, it has grown larger, gloomier and more oppressive. I mean, that just something that we seem to be dealing with these days.

What Some are Struggling with

Every story is different, and the challenges are unique to every individual's life, but let me tell you some of the things that I have seen in non-identifying ways. The social isolation of recent months has been hard for some to bear. They are just lonely, and everyone has found their own ways to deal with that. Some have quietly slipped into depression, and I know that some have essentially been self medicating. That might mean, for example, that they've been drinking more or using other prescription or non-prescription products. Others have managed to cope by developing other habits – indulgent eating, gambling or just about any other activity that might be distracting them from the pain that they feel.

And I want to be clear here, I do not believe that anybody should feel ashamed of doing what they need to do to get by during a difficult time. I'm not here to condemn anyone for the strategies that they may have used to do so. But this crisis has gone on longer than most others that we have faced which has meant that people have been coping for longer. And many have reached the point where their coping mechanisms are becoming destructive either to themselves or to the people that they love. And the problem is, once you enter into that kind of cycle, it can be very hard to escape.

Too Much Grief

Another thing that has been happening is that there has been an enormous amount of loss. People have died and more of them have died than we had become used to. Others have lost things that had deep meaning to them, the kinds of things that told them who they were and gave them a sense of meaning. People have lost jobs and businesses. They have seen people they love move away or they have lost them in other ways.



And, yes, grief and loss are, and always have been, an essential part of life. But something about this season has been particularly hard for some people to bear. The grief and loss have been piling up so quickly that some have not been able to process it. We have also often not been able to grieve our losses in the ways that we would have liked. And I suspect that all of this has meant that many people are carrying around something like a huge backpack filled with grief that they're not quite sure what to do with. And it is like a great burden that some have been carrying so long that they've almost forgotten that it is weighing down their every step and every movement.

Other Issues

These are but some of the ways in which people have been sitting in the darkness. I've certainly known others who struggle with illness, either in themselves or in someone they love. And of course, there have also been enormous economic struggles as many families have had a hard time feeding their children and keeping them in clothes. What's more, I suspect that many of us scarcely even grasp the enormity of the housing problems that have emerged as people have been simply priced out of shelter.

Alongside all that, often making it worse, we are dealing with a pandemic of misinformation. I know this is something that you have all encountered. Do you remember when conspiracy theories were just this amusing thing that some people got into. They would turn it into this little hobby where they liked to talk about the Kennedy assassination or whether or not Paul McCartney was really dead. It was harmless and amusing.

But we now find ourselves living in an age where conspiracy theories are dangerous and destructive. And I know that some of us can get very angry with people who become obsessed with anti-vax or anti-mask or with ridiculous political theories that are based on nothing. I understand this, of course, because a lot of this is having some very dangerous effects. But I've got to say that I'm learning to feel a bit of compassion for the people who get caught up in this kind of thinking. I think they are living in a particular kind of darkness where they cannot trust institutions or political leaders or health officials. And often, when you talk to them, there are actually some good reasons for that mistrust. So, I would actually count the people who are caught up in such things among the victims of the darkness. And, honestly, that kind of makes it all even more frightening.

Zechariah Breaks his Silence

And on this day, the Second Sunday of Advent which is the Sunday of peace, I declare to you that we are being given a challenge that is absolutely tailored to this present moment. This morning we read the song of Zechariah the priest. Ever since the angel first came to him to announce that, against all expectations, he and his wife were going to have a son, he has been struck dumb. This is because he had asked for a sign that it would all come true, given that it was so impossible for him and his wife, Elizabeth, to have a child at such an advanced age. The sign given, or perhaps it was a punishment, was that he was rendered unable to speak.

But now, now that the child has been born and been given a name, Zechariah's tongue has finally been loosed and he bursts forth in this amazing song. And in this alone there is a message for our time. All this time, Zechariah has silently held onto a word of promise. It is a promise for him and for Elizabeth, the fulfillment of a dream that they have long held close. For their own personal darkness

has been their inability to have a child. But clearly, during all that time of silence, Zechariah has had a chance to think. And he has come to realize that what is good news for him and his wife, must be good news for more than just them. For what good is it if he and Elizabeth are freed from their darkness but others continue to sit in it? And so, Zechariah begins to speak a promise for all.

Breaking our Silence

And that is exactly where all of us need to be during this Advent season. There is a temptation in the Christian church today to think of the good news only in terms of what is good news to ourselves. People want to embrace the idea that God has saved them, has given them the hope of life beyond death and restored their own personal relationship with God. Christianity has largely become an individualistic religion within our individualistic society. How many Christians only think of it in terms of what is in it for them? But Zechariah has learned the folly of such thinking and the joy that he has found in the promises of God must burst forth from him and be shared with other people as well.

And so, during this difficult Advent season when many are sitting in the darkness, our tongues must be loosed as well. If the good news that we have heard about Jesus is for ourselves alone, then I am afraid that it is not truly good news. And I don't mean to say by that that we need to go out and impose a gospel message onto others. This is not about pressuring anybody to listen to gospel stories or messages. And I certainly don't think it means that we need to go out and condemn people for their sin or threaten them with hellfire. That is not what Zechariah does.

But, at the same time, silence is no longer an option in this troubled world. If you have found a reason to hope or even just a reason to hold on in difficult times, you have a responsibility to let others know, especially those who are sitting in darkness. And I believe that that is what Zechariah does.

God's Commitment

He celebrates God's commitment to be with the whole people of Israel and to save them during the darkest and most difficult times – a God who **“has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”** That is the God that we must remember and who can give comfort to these sitting in darkness. For it is a God who never forgets the ones who are lost or alone.

A Child of Hope

And then he finally arrives at his reflection on this child of his that has just been born. Any time a new child is born, it is a sign of hope. Because every new child has unlimited potential. Who knows what this child might go on to do? She might grow up to find a way to defeat a particularly pernicious kind of cancer. He might grow up to be the one to broker a lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. She might discover the technology that gives us near limitless green energy. And so, Zechariah looks at his newly born, newly named child and declares his potential. **“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways... By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”**

And of course, that is a prophecy particularly concerning John. He is the one who is to prepare the way for all that Jesus is going to accomplish. But it is also a statement about what has been put into

motion by the coming of John and by the coming of Jesus. **“The dawn from on high will break upon us,”** is not merely a statement about what John is going to do. It is a statement about what God is doing at this moment in time for a world where many sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Following in John’s Path

And so, we also are the ones who are called to give light. That is why my challenge for you this Advent is simply to walk in the footsteps of John the Baptist and of Jesus. Just as they reached out to many who were sitting in darkness, that is your task this season. And, no, I’m not saying that it’s all on you individually. You are not going to drag all of the people out of the darkness and into the light. But my challenge to you is to find a way to do it for somebody this week.

What you can do

Do you know someone who is struggling with their finances? How could you practice generosity to them this week? I think that would cause the dawn to break for them. Do you know someone who is struggling with illness or disease? You don’t have to go to them with some magic word that is going to suddenly make them well. That’s not your job. But, maybe, you can just go to them. You can sit with them for a while in their struggles. You would be amazed at the difference it can make just to have a person with you when you are sitting in the darkness. And that person can be you this week.

Do you know someone who is caught up in destructive life patterns? Don’t think that you could go to them and tell them to straighten up and that’s going to fix them. It usually doesn’t work like that. But maybe you could go and listen to them and try and understand what it is that is causing them to behave in self-destructive ways. A little bit of understanding can go a long way in terms of bringing people light when they are sitting in the darkness.

And I’ll bet you know someone who’s been caught up in some ridiculous conspiracy theory. I know you’ve figured out by now that it really doesn’t help anything to argue with them about it. It never does. In fact, it will probably only make them more committed to their conspiracy. But do you know what they might need? They might need somebody who can help them see what it is they are really afraid of. They might need someone who is still actually willing to sit with them and just talk about other things.

Go to Those Who Sit in Darkness

I’m not saying that bringing light to those who sit in the darkness is easy. It’s one of the hardest things you ever could do. But, by God’s grace, you can do it. Sure, you don’t have it in you to fix everything that’s wrong in another person. Only God has that kind of power. But I think that John and Jesus discovered that when you are willing to go to people who are sitting in the darkness and love them as they are, you might just have the incredible privilege of being present when God does begin to allow the dawn to break for them.