

WITNESS IN THE DARK

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Preached at the Memorial Service for Ted Eastburn
Shove Memorial Chapel - Colorado College - Colorado Springs
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*If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
-Psalm 139:11-12*

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. -John 1:1-9

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DESPITE the sunshine outside, today is a dark day. On a day such as this, it's hard to know what to say, let alone what to think and what to feel. And yet speak we must, for while words so often fall short, words can be capable of drawing whole worlds out of the depths. Words carefully discerned can rebuild a world which has fallen apart. The poetry at the beginning of John's gospel asserts as much, that existence itself is a result of God's speaking it forth. There would be no world without the Word.

Having been Ted Eastburn's preacher and pastor in recent years, I know that he had a healthy suspicion of religious language. One Sunday, he found me during fellowship hour. He asked me in an earnest and respectful way, "Today and last week you used the phrase 'glorify God.' What does that mean? What exactly does it mean to 'glorify God?' I looked at him, thinking, "Uh oh, someone was actually listening to me." (A preacher's greatest fear is that someone might be listening.)

I'm not sure what I said to him, but I remember fumbling for an answer at which I never arrived. Ted's question haunted me then and it haunts me today. It haunts because it is a reminder me that these lives we live are steeped, terribly and wonderfully, in a dark mystery. So let us not speak in platitudes and false assurances. As we dwell together in the grief of this moment, let us grope for meaning, but let us not pretend we know what we're talking about.

I want to invite you to consider with me something much more earthy than God's glory. Let us meditate upon the image of darkness. Darkness is an earthen image as well as a spiritual one. Darkness describes the color of night, the void of deep space holding the stars. Dirt is dark and so are the ocean depths. Dark is the womb, as dark as the tomb.

Darkness can also describe the human soul when it is empty. Darkness can be an image of comfort and an image of threat. Rudolph Otto, a Jewish theologian, once described the darkness of the temple or cathedral as conveying a "mysterium tremendum." In other words, the purpose of architecture such as this space in which we gather is to inspire a sort of comforting dread at the tremendous mystery which fills all of existence. Darkness can describe a place where God dwells, and darkness can also describe a place from which God has departed and is absent.

In the Bible, and in the religious imaginations of other religions, darkness is a rich and complex image. In the Christian tradition, darkness has a prominent place.

- It is out of darkness that God creates and God uses the play of darkness and light to create time itself.
- Jesus was born in the dark of night into a political situation of great risk.
- His ministry confronted the darkness in people's lives. Because of this, some were led to describe him as the light for all people.
- When Jesus died upon the cross, the gospels tell us, darkness came upon the whole land.
- Darkness describes the inside of the tomb in which he was laid, and it describes the mood of the disciples on that holy and horrible Saturday.

Despite preachers' preference for phrases such as "glorify God," the Christian faith, as well as other faiths, knows something about darkness.

Many of us know that life itself can appear as something like a deep darkness. Darkness like that defies description and inspires a sort of terrible awe. It can be at once holy and horrible, calming and calamitous. Such darkness calls into question all claims to purpose and meaning.

When we find ourselves having stumbled into this territory, our words, ultimately, fall short, for each person's darkness is uniquely one's own. We run roughshod over holy ground when we try to diagnose or describe the dark depths of another's soul.

The darkness in which we live and move and have our being is deserving of our respect. It is a very real and undeniable aspect of our human experience. And on a dark day like today, we do well to pay it heed.

And yet, the marvel of existence is that there is any light at all. The miracle is that there is something and not nothing. The grace of life is that we, like John the Baptist in the opening verses of John's gospel, dwelling in the dark, have been sent to bear witness to the light. We, like the composer of Psalm 139, have thought, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night'. But we, like the

psalmist also may affirm that “even the darkness is not dark to you, God; that the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Today we have gathered to grieve and to be a witness in the dark. We have gathered to dwell in the darkness of loss and despair, to breathe in the dark air of grief and confusion, and to strain with the eyes of our heart for the first glimpse of light.

Where is the light? There it is, in the life of the one we mourn:

- A man who gave and received love without pretense or defense, who loved fully and wholly.
- A father who stayed and played with his children, delighting all the time.
- A public servant who advocated for the safety and well-being of his community.
- And advocate for health care made accessible, especially those with few or no resources.
- A provocateur that unsettled preachers and politicians alike while possessing an uncanny ability to remain lovable.
- A guitar hero who took his bike and his camera to the open road.
- A surgeon who took hearts into his hands and healed them.
- A human being with a big heart of his own.

There is a beautiful bit of literary detail in John’s account of the resurrection: “Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” (John 20:1)

Did you hear it? While it was still dark.

The light breaks... while it was still dark.

The tomb was emptied... while it was still dark.

The word of life was spoken to a desperate world.... while it was still dark.

Night ends and day breaks.

A Word of new life,

a spark of impossible light,

and each of us a witness in the dark.

It is only by our witness that the world will be reconstituted.

Life is *not* a given.

Light is *not* a foregone conclusion.

There is *no proof* that life is worth living.

There are only witnesses.

If there is any love, if there are any flashes of light now and then, we will only know if the one who sees them speaks them. The future belongs not to the scientist, the optimist, the dogmatist, the strategist. The future belongs to the witness in the dark. If you see a flash of light, tell someone.

This life is too fragile, too precious not to. Amen.