

SLD03.29.09 Fifth Lent
John 12: 27-36
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“Got Light?”

On this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we're getting closer to Jerusalem. In fact, we're almost there. Just another week to go. Next Sunday Jesus will enter the city triumphantly, people shouting, palms waving. But this Sunday he's thinking ahead to what's going to happen after that, and his soul is troubled.

And why shouldn't it be? Is this really the only way things can go? Is there no alternative to his suffering? His death? Why do such bad things have to happen to such good people? Where is Jesus' powerful, loving, saving God in all this?

Never mind Jesus has just pontificated to disciples about how those who love their life will lose it, how the hour has come for him to lose his life, how this will be the manner in which he'll be glorified, how parallel the divine scheme is with the way of Nature. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus has just told his disciples, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Jesus' death will bear much fruit. That's the consolation he's trying to convey to his followers. In more ways than one, Jesus is God's seed; all the fullness of God dwells in him, the whole divine DNA, and for that seed to grow, it first must die. That's the way things are, the way things go, in heaven and on earth. The time has come for Jesus to die to what it is in order to live into what will be.

Most of his life - his preaching, his example, the risks he took, the risks he's fixing to take – has been built around that understanding. But such sacrifice constitutes a

scary, painful path; it can just about kill you. In fact, it *will* kill Jesus. And this Sunday, three quarters of the way to the cross, as this eventuality becomes increasingly apparent, well, Jesus is feeling troubled and torn.

At least until his inner spiritual sergeant kicks in: “What, you think you’re something special, Jesus? That you’re somehow exempt from suffering? Excused from dying? That you rate some kind of parental pass from misery and pain? Panty-waist. Get a grip. This is the whole reason you came in the first place!”

“Sir, yes sir! Jesus snaps to attention. “This is the reason I have come to this hour. To glorify your name, Sir!”

And a voice comes from heaven, a powerful voice, an affirming voice, a voice of promise, saying, “I have glorified my Name and I will glorify it again.” At least that’s how Jesus hears it.

Others standing around just hear thunder. A few imagine they’ve heard an angel. Still others don’t hear it at all.

Remarks Jesus to the crowd, “that voice came for your sake, not for mine,” though I wonder. At this point perhaps even Jesus could use some assurance from his God that his death is not the final word. Indeed, perhaps it is out of this assurance that Jesus then testifies that when he is lifted up from death, he will draw all people to himself.

Such a gracious word from a troubled soul. Such a gracious image:

Jesus' outstretched arms, first nailed to a cross, in death; then unnailed, freed from the bondage of death, and reaching out and out, like the Christ of Corcovado, encompassing all humanity, all creation, and sweeping it into his heart in an embrace of infinite love, infinite compassion, infinite forgiveness.

"When I am lifted up," Jesus lovingly testifies, "I will draw all creation to myself."

But those who could only hear thunder, or nothing at all, they do not want Jesus' sacrificial love; they want a leader, a general, a take-charge commander who mobilizes and galvanizes the people and leads them to independence, freedom, victory over the Romans. What is all this about dying?

"The law says that the Messiah remains forever," insists the crowd. "How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? And anyway, who *is* this Son of Man?"

Jesus speaks to them again, this time in gentler, simpler terms, terms he hopes will touch their hearts and open them to the Truth.

"The light is with you," he says softly. "The light is with you a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you."

Jesus himself is that Light, and the darkness is that darkness that will overtake and overcome and destroy the Light of Jesus, that darkness that still steals the spirit, and mocks faith, and envelopes and overwhelms and sucks all the oxygen from hope.

"Walk while you have the light," says Jesus, "so you don't get lost in the darkness. So the darkness doesn't overtake you. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

And then, after saying that, Jesus goes away. Goes away from the crowd and even hides from them, because mostly they don't get it, can't see his Light, can't hear what he's saying, hear only thunder, or nothing at all.

Though some, perceiving the sound of angels, hear and receive and believe what Jesus shares with them about the light that shines in the darkness, the light that shines *despite* the darkness, the light that the darkness does not overcome.

And these ones are not afraid, not of Jesus' death, not of their own.

Is this because the darkness goes away? That suffering diminishes or death finally ends? Not observably. Jesus does not argue that the darkness goes away, only that his Light shines in its midst and is not overcome by it.

Victor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, and a Jew, was sent by the Nazis to a concentration camp in 1942. Separated from his wife, parents, and siblings, Frankl refused (somehow) to submit to despair, focusing instead on the *freedom to choose* one's outlook even in dire conditions. His book, Man's Search for Meaning, chronicles his life in the concentration camps and describes how, for him, looking for meaning in all aspects of existence, even the most horrific, was an "act of survival."¹

For Christians, looking for the light of Christ in all aspects of existence, even the most horrific, is also an act of faith. Is it also a choice? An act of will? Well, perhaps for the strong of Spirit like Frankl. But for many of us in dire circumstances - this one, who's lonely and sad; that one, who drinks too much; this one whose body is failing; that one whose marriage is miserable; or whose job is lost; or who works too much, or bears

¹ "Man's Search for Meaning" by Victor Frankl as excerpted for The Sun, Issue 397, January 2009, Chapel Hill, N.C.

unexpected burdens, or no longer feels like living...for these of us, it can be very, very difficult even to see Christ's Light shining in the darkness, never mind to choose it.

Perhaps on our better days our faith easily testifies that beneath all things, and behind all things, and within all things, and beyond all things pulses the saving Light of our Redeemer. But when we get lost in the darkness, it can feel awfully like Jesus has gone away from us, too, and hidden himself away.

I tell you, if there were ever a reason for church, this is it: to help each other find the Light of Christ in the darkness. To journey together and lift, when we are able, the beacon of Christ's light for one another and for the world. And, when we are *not* able, to turn for help to those who are bound to us by love and the Spirit.

One of Frankl's most famous quotes is this: "What is to give light must endure burning." To be sure, it was through his suffering and death that Jesus became the Light of the World. Perhaps it is through our own suffering and death that we become children of that Light.

But oh how I am grateful to have one another to journey with through Lent and other dark seasons of our lives. I am grateful for this community as well as for the insistent flickers that keep sneaking through the season's shadows, like last Sunday's naughty alleluias, Friday night's jocular finger food party, today's birthday flowers for George. We got light, you and I, because we've got each other, and Christ Jesus. At least, that's what the angels say...when I can hear them.

To the glory of God. Amen.