

Out of Sight, Out of Mind?
Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 30, 2014
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Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Throughout Lent we have been taking a look into “darkness;” from darkness to sight or *in* sight. And I think it is a safe assumption that for most of us, darkness brings to mind somewhat negative or daunting images. When I was reading through the passages for today, however, I began to see darkness in a slightly different light. Darkness is often necessary, and can even be desirable. Darkness helps sync our sleep patterns, is essential for the survival of deep sea creatures, and is used for the development of photography, to name a few examples.

You may be wondering why this matters or what that has to do with the Scripture readings today. I will be getting to that, but for now I want us to keep in mind that good things can and do happen in the dark, both literally and figuratively.

Consider the phrase “kept in the dark.” This draws us to a more figurative understanding of darkness. For someone kept in the dark, there is usually some sort of secret or activity that they are not privy to, whether intentional or unintentional. They could just be naïve, not physically around, deliberately deceived, or they could be that family member or friend who is “always the last one to know *everything*.” Sometimes we are the ones on the outside and other times we are the ones keeping people there. No matter which way it occurs, being “kept in the dark” is not something we generally rejoice in. But perhaps being a bit out of the loop is not always all that bad.

Let us consider the anointing of David. I think you would agree that David is a key player in this story, right? I did just use his name in referring to the narrative after all. The account of the story is essentially about God’s work in selecting David in order that

God's larger purpose may occur. So David's existence is a pretty big deal in what is going on and going to happen, and yet where is he for most of the events with his father and brothers? He is keeping the sheep. He is not there. We don't even hear his name in this passage until the last verse. All of the first seven sons were directly called upon by Jesse himself, yet Samuel had to ask if all of the sons were present and had to put in a special request for David to be brought in. And what does happen when he is brought in? Something that had not been anticipated. David is the one anointed by Samuel. David is the one chosen by God. So much for being kept in the dark. David may not have been central from the beginning of this narrative, and may not even know what is going on with the others. Yet, this does not prevent him from being part of the big picture. Nor does it prevent him from being chosen and finding favor with God for God's greater purpose.

While this is a very specific and microcosmic narrative, the same could be said on a larger scale for the early Christian church, specifically concerning the Gentiles. In the Old Testament we find the narrative of Israel, God's chosen people. We read about their interactions with other nations, yes, but they are the group of central focus. They would be the people we might think of first as the ones to be selected, much like we might align with Jesse and the presentation of his sons. They would be the likely pick. All of the qualities of the expected leaders and key figures are seen in the older brothers, and likewise the Jews. However, in the New Testament we read of how another group is brought in on what is going on. The Gentiles are almost suddenly part of the central focus concerning the gospel message. They are no longer a sideline group. They are no longer on the outside looking in, or kept in the dark. In reading of the early church, and what it is anticipated to be, it seems that the Jews will be the likely and sole candidates to continue on as God's chosen people. Our focus tends to land there. Yet, other nations were there all along. The Gentiles, not unlike David, are very much present, but they just hadn't been picked yet. They are in a type of figurative temporary darkness, but that darkness turns out to be not such a bad place after all. The Gentiles were developing into people who could preach, teach, and participate in the love of God in a unique way. Christ has done what was unexpected and welcomed

Jews and Gentiles alike into the family of God. Christ calls all people to follow Him and to share in the Good News.

In the New Testament we read many other accounts of people who are called in unique ways to follow Christ, such as in our Gospel lesson from this morning. In this passage we meet one more person who is also in darkness; darkness in his blindness, and darkness in his alienation. The blind man had been seen by his neighbors before, but they saw him merely as an unwanted beggar. It is not until he can see that his neighbors actually start to pay attention. And when they do, some do not even recognize him. Though, do they truly not recognize him, or was it that they had never really looked at him before? However, once he is able to see, he draws a great deal of attention to himself but even more so to the actions of Jesus. The Pharisees struggle with the events surrounding this man greatly. Perhaps it was easier just to keep this man and others like him out of sight and even out of mind? But with the teaching and actions of Jesus, their rules and way of life are being stretched, challenged, and redefined.

How often do we act like the neighbors and Pharisees in this passage and force others into darkness by alienating them, or dismissing their potential based on some preconceived notion of what we think their capabilities are? Perhaps we even listen with a skeptical or lazy ear as the new seminary intern preaches her first sermon. Or how often do we quarrel with others or distance ourselves from them because true Christians are not “people like that?” Do we refrain, at times, from sharing God’s love with others because we don’t think they want it or because we don’t think they deserve it? All too often we make judgment calls that someone is too young, too old, too immature, too conservative, too outspoken, or too inexperienced to be worth our while. These are all veils of artificial darkness that we impose on others, and are not desirable realms of darkness created by God.

It is crucial to note that this was not just any man in the Gospel of John, but a man chosen and called by God. Jesus’ words at the beginning of the passage while he is talking with his disciples indicate this very fact through saying how “God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Brothers and sisters, it is not for us to choose who is or is not allowed into God's family, and it is not for us to decide who can or cannot be effective witnesses of the Gospel. God works even in the darkness where we cannot see Him; through people who we might not pick as the likely candidates. God has built up leaders from those who were out keeping the sheep. God has called out followers from among the neglected and rejected into His family and to bear witness to His love.

Using the imagery of photography, the places of darkness for these and many others can be places of great development. Perhaps certain darkness can actually be the place of ongoing growth of faith and relationship with God that prepare us to be bearers of God's light. In this way, God is most surely present and at work in our lives and the lives of others even when we are not the central figures in the story. When we seek to move our lives or the lives of others along in our timing or the way we want it to be, it can be like running the risk of foiling the proper exposure of a photograph. We may feel that God is not with us or with others because we do not see God there, but perhaps God is working in quiet ways that will allow His works to be revealed.

Feeling like we are or have been kept in the dark can often be challenging, frustrating, or scary, yet it is not always a bad thing. Wherever we have been and whatever we have done, our experiences have become part of our story. And our stories are the continuously developing story of God's people. Our stories are ones that may take place in a great length of darkness, but the story doesn't end there. We have the Good News of Jesus Christ, and God's love for us. We are called out of the darkness and into God's light.