

## Out of the Darkness

(Mark 1:14-20)

We are in the season of Epiphany – a season of celebrating the light that came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. How do we experience that light breaking into our world today? In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” Indeed, our world today sometimes seems more filled with darkness than with light.

Recent events in the world and in our own nation bring this darkness into focus: Radical extremists who murdered 17 people in Paris last week; while in Nigeria, more than 2,000 people were killed in an attack by Boko Haram. It seems nearly every day, we hear news of another senseless shooting taking the lives of innocent people; or the pervasive scourge of hunger and disease impacting the lives of poor people around the world; the dangers of global warming and its impacts on the world’s climate and ecosystems – it can be easier to turn off the TV and avert our eyes from the darkness, pretending we cannot see it.

However, when the darkness is much more personal – it is also much more difficult to ignore. It takes the form of a devastating diagnosis for a loved one; a marriage that feels lost beyond repair; the loss of employment and income that is

necessary to sustain oneself and family; a deep depression that is too difficult to climb out of; a child or loved one struggling with addiction.

Darkness is a place of fear, insecurity, and loss. When we allow the messages around us to reinforce those feelings, we can find ourselves trapped in a spiral of negativity, our thoughts poisoned by hate. Sometimes we can get so used to living in darkness that it is hard to recognize the light when we do see it. Yet the light is a stronger force than the darkness. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

We do not always think about where we have seen God’s light shining in our world, in our own lives even, but becoming more aware of those moments when we experience that in-breaking of God’s activity in the world is a counterbalance to the times when we are unsure if God is still there at all.

I would venture to guess that if we think about those times when we have felt God’s light breaking through our darkness in our lives, most often another person was the bearer of that light to us. Because just like Jesus’ call to the first disciples, as we see here in Mark, Jesus calls us into relationship with God and with humanity. Herman C. Waetjen describes the first two disciples, Simon and

Andrew, as poor (they have only nets, no boat), and the sons of Zebedee as more affluent because they have a boat (they even have employees; they're a small family business, and their father undoubtedly needs their strong arms). Thomas Long sees these four disciples as "representative" of those who will follow Jesus in the future: "Jesus summons people from the fabric of family relationships...and from the midst of the workaday world...into a new set of relationships and a new vocation" (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*).

Only fourteen verses into the Gospel of Mark, Jesus embarks on his ministry, walking along the Sea of Galilee, proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As he walks along the shore, he encounters four, presumably young, fishermen, in the midst of their work early one morning. And he calls to them, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And the text tells us, "Immediately they left their nets or their boat and followed him."

"Immediately" – one of Mark's favorite words to move the story along with such a sense of urgency. "Immediately" – as if they didn't hesitate for a moment or give it a second thought to leave behind everything they had known up to this point in their lives, even their own father and families, to follow a man who was essentially a stranger to them. At this point in the story, Jesus presumably had no

name or reputation to precede him; nobody knew who he was. So what was it about him, about his call to these men, that so inspired them that they left everything they knew behind to follow him?

Imagine, if you will, your own reaction if, while in the midst of your day-to-day life; working in your kitchen, out walking the dog, sitting in a conference room at a meeting, caring for your loved ones; a man you'd never seen before suddenly appeared before you and said, "Come, follow me." It sounds crazy, right?

We might wonder how to connect this sort of abandonment of family with today's emphasis on "family values." But is it possible that we use our faith or at least our religious commitment to put our lives in respectable, orderly comfort? According to Thomas Long, the Reign of God isn't about making us "more effective and productive in our jobs. Our work is truly effective when it serves to express the will of God. The patterns of our lives are not made secure by the kingdom of heaven;" he says, "the kingdom of heaven rearranges them into the new design of God's own making." But Long says that all this disruption is "not to destroy but to renew," and our lives are transformed in the process (*Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion*).

Perhaps God is still speaking to us in the midst of our efforts to focus on living comfortable, orderly, pleasant lives, in the midst of our attempts to use the gospel, in the face of our expectations that the church undergird such a life. God calls us, each in our own setting, to repent, that is, to turn in a new direction, to open our lives to a radical renewal that may upset and re-orient our neat little, hard-won patterns of comfort and familiarity, the unquestioned assumptions, the privilege we enjoy without even being aware of it. Perhaps this radical renewal will contradict many middle-class, prosperity-driven theologies, for example, that seem to under-emphasize the call to work for justice for the poor. How willing are we to have our lives turned upside down in order to experience this kind of repentance? Jesus provoked many of his listeners with such expectations, but on the other hand, he inspired a number of them to leave everything for exactly such a reorientation and renewal. Their lives were never again the same, and probably not too comfortable, either. (There is an important distinction, of course, between being "comfortable" and being "comforted.")

Jesus issues the same call to us -- to be in genuine and real relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is in relationship with his disciples and with us: bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other and especially the vulnerable, holding onto each other through

thick and thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant grace.

Sometimes that call -- to be in Christ-shaped relationship with others -- will take us far from home and sometimes it will take shape in and among the persons right around us. But it will always involve persons -- not simply a mission or a ministry or a movement, but actual, flesh-and-blood persons.

So while it may be hard for us to imagine dropping everything and leaving our lives behind to follow Jesus, the call to the first disciples is a reminder to us that *Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to be in relationship with the ordinary people all around them and through that did extraordinary things ... and he still does.* The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one such ordinary person who was called on in an extraordinary moment in history. King was just 26 years old when he was appointed to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man. For 382 days, the Black community of Montgomery, Alabama walked to work and endured harassment, intimidation, and violence until they finally won victory with an end to the Jim Crow laws of segregation on busses.

King went on to become one of the founding leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, out of which the broader movement for non-violent social change began to grow. But he didn't ask to be the leader of a social movement; in fact, there were times in his life when he would have rather not been. We tend to elevate people like Dr. King on pedestals, holding up their virtues while overlooking or forgetting about their flaws, those things that make them human, just like us.

In writing of the lessons she has learned from interviewing many people of every faith tradition, Krista Tippett, host of NPR's *Speaking of Faith* writes:

*"But if I've learned anything, it is that goodness prevails not in the absence of reasons to despair, but in spite of them. If we wait for clean heroes and clear choices and evidence on our side to act, we will wait forever. And my radio conversations with people teach me that people who bring light into the world wrench it out of darkness and contend openly with darkness all of their days....Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day – none of them were simple, unsullied heroes in a storybook way.. They were flawed human beings, who wrestled with demons in themselves as in the world outside. For me, their goodness is more interesting, more genuinely inspiring, because of that reality. The spiritual geniuses of the ages and of the everyday don't let despair have the last word. Nor do they close their eyes to its pictures, or deny the*

*enormity of its facts. They say, 'Yes, and...' And they wake up the next day, and the day after that, to act and live accordingly."*

Not unlike the first disciples whom Jesus called to live into the 'Yes, and' of God's kingdom, we also experience moments in our life when we are called out of our ordinary lives into something extraordinary. This week, as we mark not only the life and legacy of Dr. King, but also the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let us remember that it is the light that has the power to cast out darkness; it is love that has the power to cast out hate. Let us choose to live into the 'Yes, and' of God's realm and follow the One who bears that light in the world.

Amen.