

Black and white. Right and wrong. Good and evil. The dark and the light.

You hear these phrases said all the time...simple phrases used to highlight the differences between two seemingly opposite ideas or situations.

While we say these phrases plenty in our day-to-day conversations with each other, it's easy to forget how much this imagery is used in other ways.

For instance, when the Chrysler car company released a new model of its Dodge Coronet in 1967, the theme of its advertising campaign was the "White Hat Special." Some of the ads featured cartoon cowboys riding around "keepin' the prices low," whereas others had the "Dodge Girl" in her signature white Stetson, chirping: "Only the good guys could put together a deal like this."

These ads didn't need any further explanation. Chrysler knew that potential buyers had all been raised on film and TV Westerns and were familiar with the symbolism of white hats. Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, the Lone Ranger—these cinematic heroes wore white hats, and bad guys wore black.

When considering the dark and the light, all you have to do is think about the age-old saying that parents tell their children when establishing a curfew. "Now, son. Nothing good ever happens after 11:00 P.M." I can say that I heard that speech once upon a time, myself. It's never the daytime that worries parents, it's always the night. It's always the dark that seems to scare us.

But somewhere along the way...somewhere in our minds, we've drawn these clear lines.

This morning, however, I'd like to invite us to re-consider some of our preconceptions of the dark and the light. One way to do that is by relating to this joke that I heard a few weeks back.

It goes like this: "When I was young, I was scared of the dark. Now that I'm older, I see my electric bill and I'm scared of the lights."

The other way - and let's be honest - probably a better way of re-considering those preconceptions of dark and light is by looking deeper into our scripture lessons and what they mean for us during this Lenten season.

Let's start with the Psalm from this morning. Psalm 63. The Psalmist, identified here as David, invites us to reflect upon the tough places we all can find ourselves in. Let's face it, our lives can full of tough places. The psalmist not only acknowledges this, but also invites the reader...invites us...to reflect on the depths of our relationship with God...even in the difficult times...when we may find ourselves in the dark.

“O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.”

When does the psalmist meditate on God? In the watches of the night. And where does the psalmist sing for joy? In the shadow of God’s wings. At night and in the shadows. In the dark.

This, to me, is what makes this text fascinating as we gather here today on this third week of the season of Lent. This particular time in the life of the church is not an easy one by any stretch. After all, we are invited during Lent to follow Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem...and to the cross.

And really the toughest part for us during Lent can be that we know how this story will ultimately end. It is, of course, Easter morning...Jesus’ resurrection. But we are not there yet. We have not decorated our churches with bright white vestments...there are no trumpets....no Easter lilies. Not yet. One might say the dark shadow of the cross still hangs over Jesus’ head...and ours.

So we reluctantly join in the journey with Jesus to the cross, as dark as that may seem. But this is a time for darkness after all. In fact, it is a season in which some churches like us begin on Ash Wednesday by asking us to consider our own mortality by the imposition of ashes. I’ll never forget the anguish I felt the first time a pastor made the cross on my forehead and said the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And really I’ll never forget putting the cross on your foreheads this past Wednesday.

But if putting ashes on our foreheads isn’t enough, many of us deprive ourselves of things that we enjoy every other day of the year.

You may be like me when you ask yourself during Lent, “Can’t it just be Easter morning already?”

The more I’ve considered that question this week, the more I’ve been wondering if I’ve got it wrong.

What if there is something to this period of relative darkness? What if something good can come from it?

What if, like our Psalmist, something remarkable can happen in the dark.

I once read a story of a remarkable true story from World War I on Christmas of 1914. German troops were marching towards Paris when they were met with staunch opposition of both French and British troops. The conflict on the Western front turned into trench warfare, which would drag on for months without either side gaining any ground. It was a gruesome stalemate, with poor sanitation in the trenches and the constant death taking place in “No Man’s Land” between the two opposing forces.

And as weeks stretched into months, the soldiers became increasingly familiar with their counterparts in the opposite trenches. Over time, cooperation became more common. This began with efforts to retrieve bodies for proper burial. After darkness fell, soldiers would venture out to retrieve their fallen comrades.

And often, enemy troops would deliberately hold their fire. Every day after dusk, food would be brought up to the troops on either side of the front. And in many places the cease-fire would be extended to these mealtimes. After crouching in their trenches for hours, soldiers on both sides appreciated the opportunity to relax while they ate dinner.

These sporadic ceasefires laid the groundwork for what would be known as the Christmas Truce. In one version of the story, the truce began when a group of German soldiers began singing a familiar Christmas carol, only to have soldiers on the British side respond with their own rendition of the same tune..."Silent Night."

A few troops emerged from their trenches into the no-man's land in between. When they weren't gunned down, others followed. The men reportedly sang more carols, shook hands, and exchanged gifts.

It was in the darkness that the opposing sides were able to go collect their fallen. It was in the darkness they could relax for a meal. It was in the darkness that someone dared sing beauty into it with “Silent Night.”

Something remarkable happened. And it happened in the dark.

With that in mind, let’s revisit our Gospel Lesson from Matthew.

In chapter 4, Jesus has not yet begun his public ministry, but we as modern readers and hearers know where his path will take him...to a journey towards his eventual crucifixion and death. Jesus knows he will die, but he also knows that there is still work to be done in the meantime...work that is full of healing and teaching and deliverance for all those he comes into contact with.

But instead of focusing on his eventual end, our text shows us Jesus in the wilderness...being tempted by the devil.

Jesus is tempted in three distinct ways: he is told by the devil to provide for himself, to not trust God’s provision, and to let the devil provide for him instead.

And all of this is happening in the wilderness...for forty days and forty nights...while Jesus is famished. This is Jesus in a dark place.

Some important points were brought to my attention by Dr. Audrey West in my preparation for this sermon. She invites us to pay attention to what happens after Jesus' temptation story:

- Jesus refuses in the desert to turn stones into bread to assuage his own hunger, but before long he will feed thousands with a few loaves and two fish.
- He refuses to take advantage of his relationship with God by hurling himself down from the temple heights, and later he trusts God's power from the heights of a Roman cross.
- And lastly, he turns down the devil's offer of political leadership over the kingdoms of the world, and instead offers the kingdom of heaven to all those who follow him.

Light...out of the darkness.

Seeing Jesus do this gives me hope, and it should give all of us hope that light can come from the dark, even in this season of Lent.

Author, pastor, and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a fantastic book called, "Learning to Walk in the Dark," and her thoughts have helped transform me and my understanding of the dark. She says this... "As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part.

Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way." She wonders that "if [Jesus'] resurrection happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air." It was this idea where it began to sink in for her that "new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

Friends, don't wait for the light of Easter to begin with your journey...your preparation for the coming resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ...your new way of living. It can begin right here, right now in the season of Lent...in the dark.

As I mentioned before, we are told at the beginning of our Lenten journey to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But also remember this...that God makes beautiful things out of dust. God created us...transformed us from the dust to be who we are today. And God can continue to renew us and to transform us through our repentance...into something even more beautiful than we can imagine. Even in the dark.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.