

Sermon for 21 February 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

First Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10 (UM756); 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

„Darkness“

„There’s a powerful moment in Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘A Raisin in the Sun.’ After suffering many hardships and interfamily conflicts and issues, the daughter, Beneatha, in anger lectures her mother.

‘Mama, you don’t understand. It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don’t accept. It’s not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don’t believe in God. I don’t even think about it. It’s just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God ... there is only man and it is he who makes miracles.’

*“Her mother pauses and looks at her, clearly processing this internally. Then she hauls off and slaps her daughter. ‘Now, you say after me, “In my mother’s house there is still God,” ‘she says.’ God was a given!”**

For some reason, I feel like starting off my sermon this first Sunday in Lent with some mention of violence. Jesus is told, realizes, believes, he has a special mission... and right away, with all the honor and confidence, and fear, of that conviction, darkness takes over. “Forty days,” in Bible-speak, signifies a long time. For him, it’s a wilderness, a desert, a jungle...”and he was tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

We have no documented evidence that Jesus even existed; and this start of the career of the individual we pray to and call God’s child starts his message, explains himself in a way his earliest followers described as a dark time, alone, tantalized, and yet profoundly protected and convicted, established, for everything that was to come in his life.

Because repetition, ritual, stabilizes human beings ... and other living creatures as well ... we have regular ceremonies to make us remember what life is all about, and how we believe we should act. Lent is one of those. It signifies serious reflection, by ourselves, about ourselves and everything else. It teaches us to think, and insists on prayer as a constant attitude and practice. It says we are not the center of things, and our feelings and desires aren’t the true guides of our behavior; and it intends, and expects, us to come out of such regular retreats and practices better off, ready for the next step, prepared for an on-going growth experience, all the way until it’s over for us and we go “the way of all flesh,” we die.

In our current world, that’s dark. It’s lonesome. It’s off-centered, because we’re not the focus or point of things, and even though we’re made for companionship, and other people are incredibly important to us, they’re not our guide after we grow up, either. The word from above, as our ancestors put it, is the news to heed. Like the mother in the play, “In my mother’s house there’s still God.”

What happens then, in our way of thinking, is just as simple, and abrupt, as Mark puts it. "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.'"

Whatever has been is superceded by what is now underway. Face it, work with it, leaving everything ... because it is, and will be, better than anything you leave behind.

Forty days together to let that sink in. Enough time to pack up and move, but no more. Everything needed will be provided. Turn loose; open up; eat supper together, and then travel.

It's beautiful. I don't know how we Southern Methodists got along without it when I was growing up. When I came to Baltimore, I was amazed at how Catholic everybody was. Schools closed on Good Friday afternoon. We were all in some neighboring church, singing in the choir, practicing for Easter. I don't know about the Baptists ... but of course message got through to us as well. Following Jesus was full-time work if we took it seriously. Attention was required all along the way.

Darkness is where seeds come alive. Fear and separation are part of promise and a future. Unless you commit, you can't develop; love doesn't fill out; the years don't bring their appointed harvest; and along the way, unless we pass through the dark, we don't see the light of day that completes everything.

So welcome aboard! Walk with me! Search out around you in this changing world what there is for you especially to do. Get work. Keep at it. Not alone, but with friends, people headed towards the good news in their own way, but true as you're trying to be. Jesus didn't do it alone. First thing we'll see ahead is him calling, getting a group together, learning, teaching, helping make the new world he says is already started and growing.

Thanks be to God.

Let us have a holy Lent, with Christ our risen Lord.

Amen.

**"Love Is the Way...Holding onto Hope in Troubled Times,"
by Michael Curry*