

Blessed be God, three persons, blessed trinity, who animates our lives and offers insight and illumination in our darkness that we might draw closer, ever closer. Amen

Holy Holy Holy  
Lord God Almighty Though the darkness hide thee...

I am haunted by darkness. Haunted by its liminal, life -giving qualities which are often overshadowed by its fearful frightening ones.

There is darkness and there is darkness...  
There is the darkness which is perfect nothingness and hence pregnant with all possibility  
And there is darkness which humanity has come to associate with fear, negativity and even evil.

There is John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul which was meant to describe a divine state of holy emptiness/ nothingness/ nada where true love might be experienced  
and there is what that term "dark night of the soul" has come to symbolize: depression and despair

No matter which darkness we consider  
The Glory of God, our HOLY HOLY HOLY God  
has the power to transform and create and shine in and through it

I would like to tell you another story to lay alongside the powerful, mysterious ones already heard this morning...

In the desert fathers and mothers tradition there is a story told about a thief who comes by darkness of desert night to rob the desert fathers. These were monks living a self prescribed ascetic life...so it is interesting that there would be any material goods of interest or value...perhaps making this more metaphoric  
the robber takes everything he can put his hands on  
the fathers watch silently and calmly  
after he rushes away shouting, one abba finds a holy bible left behind in a cubby  
he picks it up and pursues the thief  
upon catching up he hands it to him saying simply you forgot this....

amazed the thief gives everything back!

This story of the desert fathers helps me orient today's lectionary and consider it in the light of encounters in the dark. This story like so many others in the Bible reminds me not only of the power of mercy and forgiveness but also of the darkness of night when our senses struggle with finding enough light and the dark night of the soul when we might be just broken enough, empty enough, to receive God's grace and experience conversion.

It takes a crisis for change to occur. It might not be a catastrophic one. But crisis creates a crack into which the light might enter.

In fact learning theory predicts that we learn, move to different cognitive levels, not when we are comfortable and certain but when we are uncomfortable and in need of supplement...

Other words which come to mind this morning and whenever I consider encounters with the Divine in the dark or in the partly shrouded *Mysterium Tremendum*, that undefineable space which is overcome and overwhelmed with the Holiness of God, are: disoriented, discombobulated, dissonance, disbelief, disrupt, disease, distort, disagree, disappoint, dislike, disloyal, disserve...

All of these words with the prefix "dis" signify some kind of break, distancing really, from a previously understood or held state or precept. It is not a great leap to signify a separation from God.

Consider: Disobey: the opposite of what God asks of us. and  
Disrupt: The opposite of what we want for ourselves.

Time and time again. God calls us to obey; to follow; to serve; to worship; and time and time again we hesitate, turn away, misinterpret, even coopt or modify God's call to serve our self-prescribed needs instead of the needs of others. We do God and ourselves a disservice.

Isaiah, Nicodemus, the single-minded thief, and the lone Abba in the dark desert night all experience a crisis, in a disruptive, and discomforting situation. The light which penetrated their darkness and caused a conversion response is the glory and grace of the Trinity: creative,

redemptive and sanctifying. The Trinity is a process. It is pure LOVE as it is the one true God. The process is always holy always right always good and always revealing of Truth.

The transformational love of the Trinity came to Isaiah in the form of a dramatic scene which we have come to expect in Scripture but the central aspects, the transformational ones for me, are the reaching down into the temple by virtue of the graceful and gracefilled tethering hem of God. This claiming of us by God in the Holy Spirit enlightens Isaiah's despair and emptiness and offers purpose, meaning and forgiveness to his life. The coal, burning with holy truth, set to his lips surely would cause the kind of discomfort which matches the Pentecostal tongues of fire announcing the filling of our souls by the Holy Spirit. The transformation into perfect freedom is then possible...

The transformational love of the Trinity came to Nicodemus under cover of night. The drama of that encounter is in the conversation which raises more questions than answers. But therein lies the power. Trinitarian insight is often countercultural, radical and paradoxical. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, might have previously enjoyed comfort in his studies and teaching and work. He might have found security in the Hebrew Scriptures and the laws passed down. But he heard something, witnessed something, which caused a holy curiosity and while yes, he may have chosen to come in the night due to fear of the authorities, he also came in his new found disbelief in things old and disobedience to previously held expectations. His soul was then just open enough to begin to consider moving beyond earthly distinctions, like one physical birth from a mother's womb, toward heavenly offerings being born from above by the power of the Holy Spirit, from the womb of God's mercy and grace.

The transformational love of the Trinity is witnessed in the desert fathers' story in both the formation of the Abba who has lived into his call to live in the world as he came into it with nothing but the love of God in all its abundance, but also in the conversion, albeit in a bit of a panic, of the thief. When in the middle of the night, running for your life, desperate and discombobulated, you encounter God's love and generosity...well, you drop to your knees and surrender all and weep. These gestures will make you well.

So what are we to learn about all this? How are we to respond to this almighty thrice holy love of God? It is difficult not to be overwhelmed. Moses saw God in a cloud and so might we...

I believe that there are stories all around us of coming to God in darkness, or more likely God coming to us. Our responsibility is to cultivate openness and awareness by recognizing our discomforts and distress and offering them to God with a prayer like the Sanctus: Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty Heaven and earth are full of your glory...may You in your mercy help me see, feel, experience the enlightenment of your Holy Spirit. Transform my disease into that peace which passes understanding.

just as the child who awakes in the night needing reassurance and pads into her parents room to whisper the eternal question: mama papa do you love me?

just as the murderer on death row's last act is to seek forgiveness...and have it granted

just as Moses saw God in the cloud

just as the slaves met under cover of night to worship and praise the God who offered true liberation

just as Piglet takes Winnie the Pooh's hand for no reason other than "just wanting to be sure of you"

I think there are a few essential truths in these encounters:

First, God seeks us with a ferocity and eagerness which is always greater than our own desire to seek God. We often forget this mutuality of desire. Even in the story of Nicodemus we might miss God's pursuit of him if we focus on the manner and time of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus. Surely a divine seed had been planted and God had drawn him to himself as God promises to gather all things to Godself...

Second, we confuse acquiring more information about God with knowing God. Often less is more when it comes to spiritual formation. And by less I refer not to the magnitude of worship and adoration but to the spaciousness needed as we empty ourselves of our material earthly conceptions and embrace that dislocation and disproportion in order to find ourselves in God and become a beloved community. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

And Third (as this is Trinity Sunday when things come in threes) much of our faith journey is about holding the dissonance gently and offering it to God that it might be transformed. Come to me all who labor and I will give you rest.

The Power of God's Love for all creation is so magnificent, broad, high, extensive and penetrating that it is hard not to be disarmed. Yet I wonder whether disarming is not the whole point. To surrender all, to trust in this creative love and to arm ourselves instead with the light and love and grace of God.

This holy holy holy simplicity is what God may be calling us to cherish instead of constructing levels of self-serving confusion. The Trinity has been called a disease without a cure because it is in the Dis-ease that incredible peace may enter. If so, then I pray we be so infected.

Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty  
heaven and earth are full of your glory  
blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord

Take our hands precious Lord that we may be sure of you and may we be surprised by the wonder that God is already reaching for ours! Lead us on!