

Dark Valleys

Pentecost XIX

Exodus 32:1-14 Psalm 23 Matthew 22:1-14

Let us pray.

“Into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The outer darkness – a place of unknowing, of isolation, of fear. The outer darkness - a place that no one ever wants to find themselves in.

When I was 16 years old I had a good friend named Tommy. He had five brothers and sisters. His Dad worked at a local company that manufactured missiles for the defense industry. His Dad was involved at church. He was our scout leader. He was the church organist. He always had a quick joke to share.... and he drove a big fancy Cadillac, pearl white with red leather interior. He was so cool. But Tommy’s dad also had a problem.

On paydays, Friday nights; my phone would ring and too often the voice on the other end was Tommy saying that his dad hadn’t made it home from work. Five minutes later Tommy would be at my front door and off we would go into the dark night to find his dad in one of the dozens of bars that he would frequent. Once we found him, we’d pile him in the backseat of his Cadillac and bring him home to Tommy’s mom. In their kitchen on those Friday evenings I heard pleas for forgiveness - promises to attend AA meetings - tears shed over squandered paychecks.

On one Friday night my phone rang again, Tommy was at the other end of the line. Off we went into the night and finally tracked down his dad. Only when we returned to his home that night, the house was dark. Tommy’s mother and siblings were gone. She had reached her limit. She could no longer trust him to be a husband and father. He was now alone - lost in his dark valley.

Exodus 32 and Matthew 22 describe two different situations of being lost in a dark valley. For forty days and forty nights Moses left his people alone to be with God on the top of the mountain. The Israelites remain behind in the dark valley and gnash their teeth as they lose sight of Moses and forget that God has been with them throughout their exodus from Egypt.

They grow impatient and feel abandoned by Moses who God called to lead them to the Promised Land. So they turn to Moses' brother Aaron and ask him "Come, make gods for us who shall lead us." Aaron is caught between a rock and a hard place. He has faith in God but now he too begins to believe that Moses and God have abandoned him in that dark valley.

Aaron obliges the people's request and melts down their gold jewelry to create a golden calf. The revelry begins as Aaron and the Israelites begin to worship, not God, but a graven image of a golden calf.

In our parable in Matthew we see another place of gnashing of teeth, another dark valley where a man is to soon find himself. Jesus tells us of a king who invites his people to a wedding banquet. Now this banquet was not just four hours at a function hall with rubber chicken but a sumptuous feast that was celebrated for many many days. It required a commitment by both the host and the invitee, but Jesus tells us "they would not come."

The king will not be daunted by their initial refusal to attend so he sends his servants with his personal message "I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and fatted calves have been butchered for the feast. Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."

But those who the king has invited made light of the invitation and went away, one to his farm and another to his business, while the rest seized his servants and murdered them. Enraged, the king sends his troops to the murderers. Their gnashing of teeth is heard as the king's army burns their city and punishes them.

The king then says to his servants "The wedding feast is ready but those invited were not worthy. Go into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding feast." The servants go out into the streets and invite everyone, the poor, the homeless, the alien, the good and the bad, and the banquet hall was soon filled with people.

When the king comes to greet his guests he notices one man who is not dressed in a wedding robe so he speaks to him "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" The man was speechless. Then the king said to his servants "bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called but few are chosen."

On face value this parable is very thorny and difficult to understand. In fact Martin Luther refused to preach on this parable and just a few years ago as I taught this scripture to a group of clergy the discussion got quite animated as we questioned the justice of the king who demanded his last minute destitute guest wear a fancy robe to the wedding feast.

What we do know is that in the time of Jesus to not come to wedding feast or to not come properly attired was to be disrespectful or full of presumption or even to be an impostor, a party crasher. The king knew that the poor man would not have a wedding robe and would as part of his graciousness provided one for him. But rather than wear the robe to the wedding feast the man consciously chose not to wear it.

I wonder, was that because he had lost faith that he would actually be admitted to the banquet or was it his rebellion against the king who he believed had caused his miserable lot in life?

For centuries people of the church have wrestled with this parable of Jesus. Some believe that Jesus was talking about the question of Heaven and Hell, who is invited to the heavenly banquet and who is thrown into the place of darkness.

When Jesus ends his parable with his words “For many are called but few are chosen” in the Greek of Matthew *Poulos kletos oligos elektos* can be translated as “All are invited but few elect.” At the end of his parable I believe that Jesus is asking us another question – What does it mean to choose, to elect to live a life of faith?

I wonder this morning if Jesus is also saying to us in his concluding words of his parable “Many are called but few chose.” I believe that Jesus is telling us that to come to the banquet that we have been invited to by God requires a response from us.

I believe that with his words Jesus is saying to us it is our choice to put on the wedding robe of a lived faith in Christ that God freely offers us all. It is our choice to live a life in which we strive to live according to God’s will, a life in which we put aside the false idols we worship, a life in which we act out his command to love one another, a life in which we trust in Christ’s words “I am with you until the end of time.”

Friends, know that Jesus Christ the light of the world, came to earth to dispel the darkness of your life. This week as you ponder the words of Jesus given to you in his parable, be assured that each and every day Jesus invites you to a life of faith and light in Him, especially as you travel the dark valleys of your life.

In our weariness and despair, in our fears and disappointments, we often fail to trust in God. But we have a God who forgives our failures, who loves us in spite of our limits to trust in Him. In our sense of independence or rebellion we often try to separate ourselves from God but Jesus tells us that God will never separate himself from us.

Through the grace of God, my friend Tommy's father came to realize that when he trusted and depended on the love of God, and remembered that his family depended on him, he no longer needed to depend on the adulation of his bar room buddies as he bought round after round of drinks. It was a rocky road at first, but he's been sober 40 years now and happily married to Tommy's mom, all because God continues to reach out to him in love as he walks through his dark valley of addiction.

My prayer this morning for you is that as we walk together as Christ's gathered church this upcoming year, through the power of the Holy Spirit, your response to God's invitation is to choose Jesus Christ, the true light of the world, who can turn valleys of darkness into valleys of joy.

Amen.