

THE DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN

John 13:1-15, 34-35

Maundy Thursday

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Cartoonist Charles Schultz charmed the world for years with his cartoons. His gospel according to *Peanuts* includes a character by the name of Snoopy who longs to be a writer. Snoopy begins every story he writes with those familiar words, "It was a dark and stormy night."

Maundy Thursday, so long ago, was a dark and stormy night. The Bible says in John 13:30, "After receiving the bread, Judas went out and it was night." If there was no storm in the sky there certainly was a storm in the souls of the disciples. Maybe all of us have been there one time or another. I suspect we have. As Dante said in the Divine Comedy:

Midway through this life we've bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark woods,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

It was a dark and stormy night. Dark nights, difficult nights. Nights when it is hard to know where you are going. We call them dark nights of the soul.

FOR JUDAS, IT WAS A NIGHT OF BETRAYAL.

There is an old legend about DaVinci's painting of the Last Supper. In all of his paintings he tried to find someone to pose that fit the face of the particular character he was painting. Out of hundreds of possibilities he chose a young 19-year old to portray Jesus. It took him six months to paint the face of Jesus. Seven years later DaVinci started hunting for just the right face for Judas. Where could he find one that would portray that image? He looked high and low. Down in a dark Roman dungeon he found a wretched, unkempt prisoner to strike the perfect pose. The prisoner was released to his care and when the portrait of Judas was complete the prisoner said to the great artist, "You don't recognize me, do you? I am the man you painted seven years ago as the face of Christ. O God, I have fallen so low."

Judas betrayed our Lord for 30 pieces of silver. At the showdown, Judas took the cash and let the credit go. Judas got what he wanted and wound up hating what he got. As the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar laments, "Poor, old Judas."

One day he heard the call of Jesus. One day he believed. One day he saw the miracles. One day he traveled two by two with others proclaiming the gospel. Once he was a faithful disciple. Now he goes out into the night of betrayal.

Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of God." Discipleship is more than a great start. Discipleship is a faithful finish. Will we go with him all the way?

As Carol so eloquently said last Monday, "We feel sorry for Judas Iscariot because there is a little bit of Judas in all of us." We err and stray from God's ways like lost sheep. We promise faithfulness for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health but a lifetime is a long, long time. We want to be Christian in our professional and business lives but the temptations are strong. As Al Pacino said when he played the devil in the movie Devil's Advocate, "Vanity is Satan's favorite vice." We want to be loyal to the Church, but the stink inside sometimes tempts us to try the flood outside. There is a little bit of Judas in all of us.

FOR PETER, IT WAS A DARK NIGHT OF DENIAL.

It was a dark and stormy night. The night was cold. The burden was heavy. The crowd was inviting. The woman was sexy. Peter, thinking he would not be noticed, slipped in for the show. In one of life's most embarrassing moments, Peter is recognized as a disciple. Hoping against hope never to be seen, he is singled out. The woman says, "You also were with Jesus, the Galilean." Peter denies it and moves on out to the porch. A second woman sees him. This woman says, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Peter vehemently says, "I don't know the man." But his cover is blown now and soon a bystander is saying, "You are one of them, your accent gives you away." Peter begins to curse and swear. It was a dark and stormy night.

It is not always easy to be Christian. It connects you with people you may not admire and would rather not be around. It is not always easy to be Christian. It turns up the lights in places where you prefer the dark. It is not always easy to be Christian. Sometimes it singles you out in just the moment when you long just to fit in and not be seen.

Will Willimon tells the story about a sophomore who comes home from college for the summer break. He is attending the university, now in his second year. You know how it is when you're a sophomore in college. You know everything about everything. The kid, who has been raised in church, sung in the choir, and been a part of everything that has happened along the road, is now in hot pursuit of his selfish goals. He longs to distance himself from old friends and find a new life. Willimon says I ran into him at the coffee shop and said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you back at church, singing in the choir this summer." The kid, who was hesitant to acknowledge that Will was even his pastor says in response, "You won't be seeing me in church this summer. I have more important things to do."

There are times in our lives when we want to distance ourselves from the person we really are. That is denial. We separate ourselves from the faith that is really ours. O, we will come back. But for Peter that night, it was a dark and stormy

night.

FOR NINE DISCIPLES IT WAS A DARK NIGHT OF FEAR. Harry Truman made famous the statement, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” Maundy Thursday, the kitchen got hot. What could they do, what could anybody do except run, run for your life? I have often wondered: Where did they go? What did they do? Did they walk the streets? Did they go home? Did they stop at the bar and drink their blues away? Did they take cover in small groups or did they hide in alleys all alone? I don’t know what happened to them that night, but it was a dark and scary night for the disciples.

The nights are full of fear, are they not? On the six-month anniversary of the World Trade Center bombing, I watched the film footage of a fire fighter inside one of the buildings. People scrambling everywhere, bodies thumping to the ground, in the backdrop fire fighters bewildered. What could it have been like? I cannot even imagine. Then, even worse, when the building collapses, everything goes dark. I cannot comprehend that kind of fear. Darkness. Massive, massive darkness.

Our darkness may not be so public, probably not that dramatic, but nonetheless real. We have been scared out of our wits from time-to-time. Eugene Lowery says, “When I was ten years old, my parents used to go out at night and leave me with my fourteen-year old brother, my oppressive, older brother, Ralph. I would go downstairs to the rec room in the basement to get away from him and his insults. I would be safe for a little while, but soon he would sneak down and lock the door and turn off the lights. I would scream for him, Ralph! Ralph! But he wouldn’t say a word. He’d just leave me there. I was totally out of control.” It was a dark and fearful night.

FOR JESUS, IT WAS A DARK NIGHT OF STRUGGLE.

’Neath an old olive tree, ’neath an old olive tree,
Knelt the savior alone on his knees.
Not my will but thine be done,
Cried the Father’s own son,
As he knelt ’neath the old olive tree.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, Jesus wondered if the price was right. Such dark nights of the soul always cause us to pray, to struggle, to weep, to wonder, and to weigh the options—to go over it again and again. Tonight we go to dark Gethsemane, the night of struggle.

Through the centuries, the greatest of saints have been there. St. John of the Cross of Spain called it the dark night of the soul. Have you been there? Do you understand?

Jean Bloomquist, in an article in Weavings, describes her most recent dark night. “The darkness engulfed me personally, professionally, emotionally, and

spiritually. I was depressed, deeply depressed... I felt like I had lost everything. I had no sense of direction or meaning; faith eluded me. It became increasingly difficult to talk about God, or even listen to others talk about God.”

Ella Wilcox expressed it this way:

All those who journey soon or late,
Must pass within the garden's gate,
Must kneel alone in darkness there,
And battle with some fierce despair.

It was a dark and stormy night. All that is within me wants to proclaim something else tonight, but I will wait until Easter. You are never ready for Easter until you have walked through the dark and stormy night. But, into such darkness, the dawn will come. Remember it is often darkest just before daylight. And let me tell you tonight, you are in no dark corner where your Savior is not there, too.

So let me finish with an old Rabbinical story about a man who left his village weary of life, determined to escape to a magical city. He walked all day until night came and there he put together a little bed in the forest. Since he really did not know which way he was going, he set his shoes in the direction he was running so he could continue in that direction in the morning. And he slept for the night.

But something strange happened in the night, so the old story goes. An angel came, picked up his shoes and turned them around. The next morning the guy awakened and continued his journey. He walked all day long and at night he came upon the magical city. It looked extremely familiar. When he found his way back home, his family and his friends were so glad to see him that he lived the rest of his life happy ever after.

O my dear friends, on dark Gethsemane nights, may the Savior who is full of grace come and pick up our shoes and turn them around so Easter will bring us finally home. Amen.

