

LAMENTING THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Psalm 42

April 10, 2011

One of my best friends growing up was a girl named Stacey.

Her dad was a band director at the time just like my dad, which is why I guess our two families became thick as thieves apart from just seeing each other at church on Sunday mornings.

Stacey and I were like twins, color coordinating our outfits, choreographing dances to Partridge family songs, and bossing our younger brothers around when we had family sleepovers.

But that all changed when my friend's father left band directing, went to Perkins School of Theology, then Brite, and answered his call to the mission field.

I remember the day when their family left for Thailand. I was bereft. My eight-year old brain didn't understand that 3-4 years was really a drop in time's bucket. For me, as we said 'bon voyage' at the airport, it felt like an eternity.

And the emptiness was tangible. Where once I had a friend to whom I could tell everything, now it felt like there was no one there!

Of course, those who have the benefit of years know such moments pass—and they did, as I made new friends who lived close by.

But in the moment, the feeling of friendlessness felt utterly complete and final.

I would imagine we've all had events in our lives where we've felt the pain and ache of abandonment to a greater or lesser degree. A few years back, Pepper Rodgers was in the middle of a terrible season as football coach at UCLA. It even got so bad that it upset his home life. He recalls, "My dog was my only friend. I told my wife that a man needs at least two friends, and she bought me another dog. Then when she moved out, she took both of them with her." (Hewett, James L. Illustrations Unlimited. "Deep Rejection" pg. 227.)

Many of us know that hollow emptiness in a house the first time we come back to it alone after all the family has left and we're by ourselves. Some of us know that sense of abandonment when the one to whom we pledged "I do," --didn't—and we felt that gaping wound of an empty and hurting heart.

It's that same experience that the Psalmist is referring to in today's scripture—a lament of abandonment and emptiness. But instead of experiencing this at the hands of another person, the Psalmist is floundering about, trying to recapture the sense of God's presence.

⁹ I say to God my Rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?"
¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"

The Psalmist is lamenting the Dark Night of the Soul—an experience that people of faith have described throughout time.

"I was so happy feeling God's closeness for so long," a friend recently shared with me. "But now, there's just a big, empty void. I wonder if I have done something wrong and am being punished. Or maybe God is testing me to see how well I hold up!

"Another friend once said to me sadly: 'I have never felt the presence of God. I hear other people talking about their wonderful experiences, but nothing like that has ever come my way. Do you think that there's something wrong with me?'" (Flora Slosson Wuellner, Heart of Healing, Heart of Light. Upper Room Books: 1992. pg.97)

Well, if there's something wrong with my two friends, they are in great company. The dark night of the soul has been written about for centuries in the classics of spiritual.

Old King Saul in the first Hebrew book of Samuel experienced that sense of absence. Before the battle with the Philistines in which he and his sons were killed, he tried to make contact with God. He tried to pray, but the heavens turned to iron. He said, 'I'll lie down and have a dream and God will speak to me,' [because God had done that with Saul before], but he could not sleep. He sent for the preachers. "Is there any word for me from God?" They had nothing. He finally broke down and went to a fortune teller, so desperate was he. He felt the absence of God; he felt distant from God. (Craddock, Fred. The Cherry Log Sermons. Westminster John Knox Press: 2001. pg.58).

Much later, a noted Christian mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote, "There comes a time when both body and soul enter into such a vast darkness that one loses light. There comes a time when the soul 'sinks down into the night.'"

John of the Cross, who coined the phrase “dark night of the soul,” wrote volumes about this experience trying to explain why it is a person may suffer from a feeling of abandonment by God. (Kidd, Sue Monk. When the Heart Waits. Harper:1992. pg.151.)

And finally, I think of Mother Teresa, ministering to those often left by others to die. How shocking it was after her own death to have passages from her journal read in which she shared her own long dark night of the soul, as she wrote with weary familiarity of an arid landscape from which, seemingly, the Deity had disappeared.

Other people have used other phrases to describe the experience: “spiritual dryness, the soul’s echoing emptiness, a distressing encounter with a hunger for God presence.”

Hear again the psalmist’s plaintive cry

¹ As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

Though we don’t talk about it very much anymore in a culture that is less and less aware of the spiritual nature of human kind, still, the experience is very real, and may be the cause of why many people turn their back on faith.

On occasion, we may have all felt spiritually empty, walking around carrying a dried-out faith, bereft of God’s presence, ignored by God’s attention, looked over because we think we’re non-descript or not important in the divine scheme of things or being punished for transgressions we think have offended our God.

Why is there a “The Dark night of the Soul”? Several people have given thought to this. Fred Craddock, one of the greatest preachers ever to arise out of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) once shared that he wondered if God might just get tired of us and say, ‘Try it by yourself.’ It might be that sometimes God needs to let us do it on our own to develop some strength.

Craddock started pondering that after his wife, Nettie, and he got acquainted with a minister in New York City who had no arms.

Craddock writes, “He was telling us one day of the experience of learning to put on his own clothes. He said his mother always dressed him. She fed him, she dressed him, she fed him, she dressed him. One day, she put his clothes in the middle of the floor and said, “Dress yourself.” He said, “I can’t dress myself.” She said, “You have to dress yourself.”

He told us, ‘I kicked, I screamed, I kicked, I screamed, I yelled at my mother, “why don’t you love me anymore?!”’

Finally he realized that if he was going to get any clothes on, he would have to put them on himself. After hours of struggle, he got the clothes on. He said that it was not until later that he learned that his mother was in the next room crying.” (Craddock, op.cit., 58-59)

Another wonderful preacher from the United Church of Christ tradition, the Rev. Flora Slosson Wuellner, suggests that our feeling of separation “may not necessarily have anything to do with sin or being ‘unspiritual.’ There can be many other reasons:

We may be experiencing deep fatigue through stress, over self-extending, lack or nurture and recreation, or some bodily imbalance....Or we may be experiencing the presence of unhealed wounds that are making it hard to love, to respond, to trust. We may be internalizing the problems or heavy depressions of others around us; some individual to whom we are close or some community to which we belong. We may be experiencing the natural ebb and flow of feeling and awareness.” All relationships go in and out of degrees of closeness—it’s just part of the rhythm of life. (Wuellner. op cit., pp. 98-99.)

But my favorite response comes from the author Sue Monk Kidd, who wrote the best selling book and movie, The Secret Life of Bees. Kidd describes her own journey into the dark night of soul when she wrote in her journal on Palm Sunday. “I feel as if a candle has blown out inside me...I feel wrapped in an awful, silent pondering that doesn’t know any answers, one questions.... the darkness gets excruciating. In fact the other word that sums up my darkness is tension...I’d like to be rid of this darkness. To unwrap the cocoon. Get busy. Do something to take my mind off my suffering, latch onto some easy neon answer that will camouflage the shadows. But I have the sense lurking inside that there’s a mystery unfolding in the darkness that can’t come any other way. Could it be that this is a holy dark?”

Then later that week, Kidd remembered the time she was pregnant with her daughter and her son, Bob, was three years old and scared of the dark. She writes, “We put a nightlight in his room, but sometimes he still cried out for me in the middle of the night.

One night as I held him against me to comfort him, he touched my rounded abdomen and asked, “Mama, is it dark inside there where my little brother is?” (He was convinced that his sister was a boy.)

“Yes,” I said, “it’s dark in there.”

“He doesn’t even have a nightlight, does he?”

“No, not even a nightlight,” I said.

Bob patted my abdomen. I patted him. Finally he asked, “Do you think my brother is scared all by himself in there?”

“I don’t think so, because he’s not really alone. He’s inside me.” Suddenly I had an inspiration. I said, “And it’s the same way with you. When it’s dark and you think you’re all by yourself, you really aren’t. I carry you inside me too, right here in my heart.”

I looked into his face, wondering if he understood what I mean. He didn’t say anything; he simply lay back down and went to sleep. That was the last time he called out in fear of the night.”

Sue Monk Kidd goes on to remind us, “When we enter the spiritual night, we can feel alone, encompassed by a fearful darkness. What we need to remember is that we’re carried in God’s womb, in God’s divine heart, even when we don’t know it, even when God seems far away.

I share that growing awareness with her. First, God was only “up there.” Then God was “all around.” Next I began to see that God was also “within me.” And now, most shocking of all, I was finding that I am always “Within God.”

Kidd offers the comforting image of God’s womb or God’s incubator as a source of comfort for those who find themselves in the midst of the dark night of the soul. She feels that the darkness has purpose if you give it time--that something new is getting ready to be born. (Kidd, *op. cit.*, pg. 149)

She leans on the teachings of a more contemporary Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, who talked about his dark night of the soul as a time when God stripped him of everything he had known and assumed to be true about God, and began to start over, revealing God’s true nature—not just what society told him. Because of his own wrestling with God’s absence, Merton is able to warn other who find themselves suddenly in a period of spiritual distance from God to be cautious about being carried away with impatience. They may be tempted, as he was, to “run away from the darkness and do the best he can to dope himself with the first light that come along.” (*Ibid.*, pgs.151 & 146)

Instead, Kidd and Merton invite others to join them to be “night travelers,” people who walk in the dark night of the soul without panicking, but patiently waiting to see what is being incubated in their lives while they wait in darkness.

I suppose that’s why I wanted us to explore lamentations on our 40+ day Lenten journey. I wanted us to rest in dark places that many times even the church tries to ignore. I wanted

to invite us to be aware of those places, and honestly acknowledge them as a church family, and to shine the light of Christ on them.

When next we gather, we'll be on the cusp of Holy Week, remembering the parade of Palm Sunday and hearing the echoes of Hosanna in the highest—a time, I wonder, if Thomas Merton would say, was one of those mistakes people made in an attempt to dope themselves with crowd frenzy so they wouldn't have to look at the darkness creeping up around them when evil visited Jerusalem.

I hope we don't run away to false lights, as the people did that day. I hope that we can stay in the darkness of Holy Week to see what God is preparing for us. I hope we can face the tomb—not as a period at the end of a life, but as a place of dark incubation, waiting to see what is preparing to be born.

Do you feel God's absence in your life? Do you feel abandoned by God? Good. Don't despair. God's holding you in that darkness for some reason—a new part of life getting ready to be born.

Be not afraid. As our Psalmist this morning said,

Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.
By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life. Amen