

Sunday, March 15, 2015 – Lent 4

Upside down and inside out: God amidst the shadows

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; *John 3:14-21*

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Scott Peck begins his book *The Road Less Travelled*, with the statement, “Life is difficult.”

It does not take much convincing for us to know the truth of that statement.

The question becomes:

What do we turn to?

To whom do we turn?

Where do we turn when life gets difficult?

When life overwhelms us?

When life is lived more in the shadows than in the light?

Living in our media-saturated culture, thing-saturated culture, I am amazed at what we are constantly inundated **with offers of what we ought to turn to.**

This week, I got a FedEx mailing from Sprint in the mail advertising a new cell phone offer.

– Look at what they’re selling

– “Hope” in a new phone.

An expression reserved for something that is deeply dear to us is being used to sell a phone

– with the underlying message that what we long for can be met by a new phone.

Sprint is not the only false prophet in this, offering us a false hope.

It’s evident in our media, sports, entertainment, hero worshiping-saturated culture.

So, besides life being difficult, we also find it empty.

Where do we turn?

To whom do we turn?

When the shadows of life confront us?

It does not really matter if we bring the shadows into our own lives by poor choices, unhealthy decisions, or whether these shadows are thrust upon us by circumstances.

Whether it is “our fault” or “not our fault” we find ourselves living in the shadows

– and life is difficult.

A number of years ago we experienced a difficult time in our lives as we tried to walk with our daughter in a difficult time in her life.

She had made some poor decisions and now she had to face the consequences

– I am sure she thought she had to face them alone

– because she was in a place of rebelling against us, her parents, against authority, against life.

My wife and I were trying to figure out how to walk with her in a way that she would be open for us to walk with her

- there was no decision for us in this
- we loved her and there was no thinking that we would do anything else, but to walk alongside with her
- that she would not be alone in this.

Yet, we felt shoved away.

I remember one night as my wife and I were going to bed
– as our daughter was laying in bed, she called out to me.

“Dad,” she said, “You’re scaring me.”

“Why,” I asked, “How am I scaring you.”

“Well, you’re not yelling at me for what I’ve done
– don’t you care?”

I responded, “Well, will yelling at you help?”

She responded, “I don’t know.”

I said, “I yell at you over stupid things

- like leaving the lights on, or the front door unlocked when you come in at night, or not taking care of your car as you should.

I yell at you out of frustration

- say my piece, and then go on from there.

This, this what you are going through, and we going through this with you is going to take some time.

This, requires us to walk together with you for a while, however long it takes.

I don’t know how long it will take, or what consequences you’ll experience, but mom and I are here for you for the long haul.

We are here to walk with you.”

Attitude-wise, things did not change overnight, but they did change.

As we walked with her; as she walked with us

- we managed to navigate these dark days in her life, these difficult shadows in her life.

And not only did she look to us,

But together we looked to Jesus to lead us through this time.

The path we navigated was not an easy one, but it was a path on which the Spirit was leading her and us and it brought her (and we as well) to a place of light in her life.

That’s what is behind what we read in Numbers 21.

The Israelites were grumbling again

- against God and against Moses
- for being in the desert (they forgot that their desert experience was much to their own doing).

And however, we understand the appearance of the snakes, whether punishment from God, or their perceiving this was God's punishment

- they were brought into a dark time in their life as a people
- trying to stay alive.

The solution?

For Moses to erect a bronze image of a snake on a pole

- (similar to the medical symbol later on denoted as the Rod of Asclepius in Greek mythology
- a relationship that might be interesting to explore)
- and for the people of Israel to look upon it in order to be healed.

“It is totally illogical to think that looking at a bronze image could heal anyone from snakebites, but that is exactly what God told them to do.” <http://www.gotquestions.org/bronze-serpent.html#ixzz3Tzm3CVWG>

What is the significance of this?

In our times of darkness,
When we live life in the shadows,
We can often become discouraged, even depressed,
Because we do not know where to look,
We do not know from where our help comes.

“Look to the snake on the pole” is a call to help us look in the right direction.

Not to look to ourselves, not even to look to one another,

We are called to look to God,
To trust in God in the midst of our shadows,

For us to take our eyes off what keeps us in the shadows in order **to begin to see a way to life again.**

It took an act of trusting God for anyone to be healed, and the serpent on the stick was, not only a reminder that their suffering came as a result of their own grumbling against God

- it became an act, an irrational act
- that the only place to turn was **to look to God.**

In our times of darkness, when we find our life in the shadows, we are called to “lift up our eyes to God.”

We are reminded of the psalmist/the worshiping people of God (a Psalm of Ascents) who cry out in their darkness

- Psalm 121: 1-8
- “From where does my help come from?”

And almost immediately in response, the psalmist confesses, the people confess,
“My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”
And we find ourselves today, still needing the reminder – *“to lift up our eyes.”*

Perhaps, deep down as followers of Christ, we believe that because we are with Christ, life ought not to be as difficult as it is.

And yet, though we may acknowledge Immanuel – “God with us,”
– life is still difficult
– and we conclude, we feel pretty sure we are in this alone
– God has somehow abandoned us

So where do we go from here?

Why even bother showing up here on Sunday mornings?

Yet, it exactly this encouragement we need to hear: *“to lift up our eyes to God”*

It’s an encouragement we need to understand
– and it can be found in John 3:16ff, a passage we so readily misunderstand.

It’s a text that is so overused, and so we may think it has little new for us to hear
– we’ve heard it all
– and most of that has left us with a negative image of what this passage expresses.

But John 3: 14-21 is a word of grace, rather than a word of judgment.
As is our other text from Ephesians 2: 1-10

These passages are a calling, a reminder to each of us
– **because when we find ourselves in the shadows, we lose our way in knowing where to turn.**

We are called,
each one of us is called,
“to lift up our eyes,”
“to lift up our eyes to where our help comes from.”

It is a recognition that too much of our living is lived in the shadows, in darkness.

David Miller, from AMBS, has a unique rendering of Ephesians 2:3.

The passage is often translated as, “like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” or “objects of wrath” which expresses that we are being judged for our sinfulness.

Miller reminds us, that the Greek actually states, “we are children of wrath” and therefore, has a different nuance of meaning.

Miller suggest, it could be translated as: “we are wrathful children, our nature is to be wrathful, especially towards others”

– it is more of a description of who we are
– we are a human race living in darkness
– not only towards God, but towards everyone else.

To me this makes much more sense in light of the next phrase

– “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.”

Rather, than our being under judgment of God

- God recognizes our dark, rebellious state and is the One who comes to us to heal us, to reconcile us.
- because it is by grace, you have been saved.

It is by grace

we are set free, saved, healed,
as we lift up our eyes to the One who heals us, sets us free

And we are not only reconciled to God, but we are reconciled with one another

- no longer to be wrathful children in relation to others,
- i.e., in looking to God, in relying upon God, we no longer respond in wrath in relation to others
- we become a peacemaking people through Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2, as Miller expresses, is a description of who we are in our places of darkness

- **but God comes to us to lift us out of our darkness**
- **it's all grace!**

Lift up your eyes to the One who is our help!

And that I think helps us understand John 3: 14-21.

Eternal life has to do with life that is not governed by wrath towards others, but in living in such a way that brings peace into the world.

Salvation is not just rescuing us from ourselves, but sets us free from all that binds us, keeps us in darkness in order for us to become sharers of God's presence and love in the world.

John 3: 16-17 is therefore, a calling *to lift up our eyes* to the Lord, to Jesus

- who is the author and completer of our faith (Hebrews 12:2),
- who is the one who holds our life together (Colossians 1:17),
- who makes us new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- so that we might participate with God so that we might share in God's reconciling work in the world (v. 18).

When we are in darkness, when our life is lived in the shadows, we have a difficult time knowing where to turn.

We do not know where to turn.

We do not know where to look for help.

We might even look at what is going on in our community as a time of shadows

- entering into courageous conversations,
- wondering where it might lead,
- wondering if there can at all be a healthy outcome.

Where do we turn?

Where or to whom do we look for help?

And in the midst of all we experience,
we hear God speaking to us

- **Turn to me, turn your eyes to me.**

And, since Jesus is the embodiment of God

– **we are called to turn our eyes on Jesus**

- who has come into the world, not to condemn the world,
- but to save/set free all humanity
- through him.

This is a word of grace,

NOT a word of judgment

- we need to understand that
- especially in our shadow times.

We live in enough judgment

– judging ourselves, experiencing judgment in our times of darkness, abandonment, aloneness.

But God comes to us,

Calls us to lift up our eyes to God, to Christ, to the author of life and peace

So that we might be helped to live

– no longer as wrathful children, but as children filled with peace and life.

May we ever be “*lifting up our eyes*

– *to whom our help comes from!*”