

Sunday December 20, 2020-
Sermon: “Holy Darkness” Part 1
8:30am: Luke 1: 46b-55
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing with our Holy Darkness that is seeking to find the Holy moments in some of our darkest moments through scripture that are either symbolic, literal or figurative.

And I first wanted to take the opportunity to celebrate all of you who have been attentive and open to this Holy Darkness sermon series.

Because if I can be transparent with you, this Holy Darkness has taken a tremendous emotional toll on my spirit just as I am suspecting it may have impacted your's as well;

For one, I suspect some of you may be thinking; the season of Advent is supposed to be a time of hope and joy.

Listening to the feedback that I have received concerning this sermon series; Some of you have expressed to me

an initial resistance to want to talk about darkness, because church is supposed to be a source of hope for the people.

So for people who resonate with this statement, I would like to say to you....I agree...

It is difficult to talk about darkness, especially since we are already submersed in enough darkness;

The temptation for someone identifying with this sentiment is to want to see the church as an escape from the darkness....

So this series may be a painful trigger for some of you and I need to say I resonate too with this level of discomfort because I'm triggered too.

I got no sleep last night because of the anxiety of preaching what the Holy Spirit put on my heart to finally preach.

For talking about darkness so much has really brought out some of the good, bad and ugly within myself.

The good it has brought out in me is a little more patience and more reliance on God to help carry this tormented messenger through.... I'm talking about me.

The good that I will dive more into for my message at 5pm for Christmas Eve that I also am aware of is a shift of perspective;

A shift from worrying about the many, many details of things that need to be done in the life of the church; especially during this Advent Season; into a perspective that focuses more on the discernment and wisdom my hungry soul has desperately needed from the Lord; Not suggesting that those things are not important or perhaps even meaningful;

Just celebrating the idea that life has slowed down just enough, where I am able to face the darkness and absorb it and learn from it;

The bad that this sermon series has brought out of me is recognizing the darkness that still lies within myself; that I thought I already conquered; such as self-doubt, handling

conflict without it tearing me apart, because of all of the heavy emotions that come with it; meanwhile straining to find the ability to still nurture and help lead people through this darkness, has been challenging to say the least.

For this sermon series has triggered some emotions within me surrounding my ability to navigate relationships in a different manner; since we are all essentially isolated from one another;

This series has brought forth heartache, headaches, stomach aches, weight loss from stress and tears.... A lot of tears.

And then the ugly that this sermon series has brought out of me, is some level of anger towards humanity as a whole as it pertains to this pandemic and social justice issues; not to mention the fear of death...me dying, my mom dying, my husband dying, my close friends and loved ones dying; that even the Good News of everlasting life cannot seem to override permanently... if I am allowed to be

honest with you; let's just say that the mustard seed of faith that I have; I pray will carry me through;

For the ugliness of this darkness that I am experiencing is trying to claim me, taunt me, restrain me, stifle me;

This insidious darkness is trying to deplete me and tempt me to not trust my gifts, to not trust my call, to not trust anything that I once had more clarity on; that I once felt more assured of;

The bottom line, the spiritual warfare that has come out of this darkness that I am still trying to fully discern where it stems from; has caused me to want to literally stick my head into the sand; or hide in the cave like Elijah or willingly wait for the whale of Jonah to swallow me up; until someone comes along to wake me up from this terrible nightmare.....

This darkness I have been experiencing, as I wrestle like Jacob on the hill with the angel of God, has turned my prayer and discernment process into cries out to the Lord....Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow

of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

But even in that, I wonder when will my cup overflow again?!

For the vicious cycle of this darkness hurts; the psychotropic medicines out there can't fully help; Because this type of darkness requires more help; The help that causes me to lift up my eyes to the **hills**-- where does my help come from?

The good news is that the still voice of God can still faintly be heard in the midst of my darkness; whispering to me that My help still comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth..... this truth has thankfully not changed. And don't get too alarmed for me because church family even in my raw transparency; I also know that it is not my will but thy will;

And like Jacob, I will not let go until God blesses the work of this Reconciling Ministry that I have been called to! For I've come too far not to give up now....

And I have learned from Lot's wife not to look back, but to keep moving forward as I strain to keep the main thing...the Main thing;

Jesus, Precious Jesus; Oh, for grace to trust Him more!

Hallelujah!

But the reason why I spent some time being intimate, vulnerable, transparent and perhaps uncomfortably raw to those who have been taught that you are not supposed to share your darkness; or to those who perhaps abide by the unspoken rule that tells us it is too risky to expose your darkness.... is for three reasons.

The first reason is that for one; I am somewhat at a lost as it pertains to being able to connect with you all. I feel as I have been robbed from being able to build meaningful relationships within this beautiful community that I am beginning my second year in the way I would like to.

Therefore, the gift of the 8:30 worship service is that it lends itself for the individual to explore these preaching/teaching concepts on a personal intimate level, so that at the 10:45 service, we are able to take that difficult but

important work and participate fully in the life and body of the church.

I also am intentional in being more personal and intimate with you, so that you can continue to learn who your spiritual leader is; even if it is from a far; the good, the bad, the ugly....I'm unveiling my soul to you right now; for I am not a woman who can hide behind facades even if I tried.... this is who I am.

Not to mention it is time to address the elephant in the room; I am part of the voice of the marginalized crying out in the darkness;

So my darkness may not resonate with some....this I know;

Furthermore, my darkness may not be easy to hear, when some might want to avoid the darkness altogether during this Advent season;

But trust and believe that by Jesus being born in the darkness; may I suggest if we can't bear witness to the darkness of the marginalized; if we can't listen to the

stories of the darkness of the oppressed; if we can't tolerate the darkness of the poor and the overlooked and all who are held captives by systemic, oppressive restraints; then how can we begin to bear the witness of the love and life of Christ?

How can we do the great work of seeking justice; love mercy and walking humbly with God?

How can we truly feed the hungry or clothe the naked; if we dismiss the darkness of these communities which I happen to be a part of?

This is the task of what it means to be a reconciling ministry;

For to truly bear the Reconciling symbol that First UMC Lincoln worked so hard to make sure that our church was listed amongst thousands of other churches across the globe;

To fully reconcile means we can't escape the darkness;

For the great work of love, justice and mercy can only be done in the darkness; simply because that is where this work is needed the most!

For it's dark out there for our Queer communities; for we must not forget that the journey of becoming an inclusive denomination has been temporarily placed on hold, but once we get through this pandemic; the work for justice will continue on. Hopefully this darkness we are all in together; globally at the same time; may soften some hearts;

The Israelites incredibly long journey in the dark wilderness diminishes my hope regarding this subject unfortunately, but hey, one can only hope right?!

It's dark out there for women of all ages, nations and ethnicities;

It's dark out there for people of color like me;

So what that means as it pertains to my leadership and the beautiful journey that we are cultivating together; I would like to plant a seed within you that having a Black

female pastor over a predominantly White congregation;
will require a level of trust and space in your hearts to hear
a different worldview perspective as it pertains to the
darkness and many other topics;

at the same time I hope that you know that there is a huge
space in my heart ready to learn, adapt and grow with you!
It's dark out there for the essential workers straining to see
the light of relief from Covid; being among the first to
receive a vaccine; as they lead the world back into a new
normal.

It's dark out there for those who have no healthcare or
pillows to lay their heads on;

It's dark out there for our faculty, teachers, administrators ,
students both virtual and in person and the guardians/
parents and families attached to them.

It's dark out there for all who have been silenced, crippled
and dismissed by corrupt systems designed to keep them
entrapped in the darkness;

It's dark out there church; this is why we must wrestle in the tangles of the darkness;

For this is the true essence of Advent that was by no coincidence birthed in the darkness;

So we must face the darkness so that we may be able to understand and bear semblance to Jesus light!

And friends I have only scraped the surface of the darkness that surrounds all of us.

I encourage you to continue to converse and explore the communities that are impacted by the type of darkness that I am describing this Advent season.

I invite you to consider to explore the manger that we are about to embark on; as it pertains to the Christmas Eve messages I have prepared and consider the darkness that Christ would be born into and how this shapes Jesus ministry as a result.

The second reason I spent so much time on unpacking my own feelings as it pertains to this sermon series, is to

let you know that if any of these emotions have come up within you; that you are not alone.

For I am in ministry **with you** folks and although my call is to the life of the clergy; I am still human.

Furthermore, I want you all to know that I am experiencing some of the same feelings as you might be feeling.

So you are not alone...your spiritual leader is walking beside you in this very difficult process.

The third and last reason why I spent so much time essentially purging out my soul to you is because this is how I am seeing Mary's darkness displaying itself; For in our scriptural lesson today in Luke; we are witnessing what we call the Magnificat;

The "Magnificat" is so named from the first word in the Latin version. It is a magnificent hymn-poem, covering verses 46–55. It bears striking resemblance to the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and is much like the Psalms in content and spirit. In fact, it is almost a mosaic of quotations from the Old Testament.

So what is happening in our gospel lesson is essentially a purging of Mary's soul as well.

After three months, Mary left and returned to Nazareth (v. 56).

Now whether this was before or after the birth of John the Baptist we are not told.

Consequently the commentators differ. One commentator suggests that "Mary returns to her home before the birth of Elizabeth's child.

Another commentator that I read from agrees with this view and adds the following reason for Mary's return: "We judge that Mary hastens home because she wanted to avoid the people who would soon throng the house of Elisabeth.

Either way, whatever was the motivation for why Mary was there, the text allows us to continue to explore this;

What is evident as I tie back to the darkness, that Mary's soul has experienced some sort of purging process;

Somewhere, somehow Mary has absorbed the news from the angel Gabriel that she would give birth to the Messiah;

I said **somewhere, somehow** Mary has worked out the darkness of her soul that was filled with anxiousness, fear and worry; especially learning from the prophet Simeon that her baby Jesus would not be hers to keep;

For yes Mary is Jesus mother;

And yes she would prove to be able to carry Jesus in her stomach for at least long enough for his organs, brain and all that would make a healthy baby to be able to do so; only to learn that she would not be able to swaddle her baby as long as she would have liked to;

For at some point her son would belong to the world;

At some point, her son would die for the world;

So taken all of this in and more; the terror that she must have felt learning all of this and the uncertainty that comes with the dark prophecy that she received from the prophet Simeon in Luke 2: 25-35;

I would imagine that some sort of purging of the soul occurred within Mary; similar to how I revealed my own purging process;

Mary **somehow, somewhere** through the purging process of examining her own good, bad and ugly that comes from her own darkness of fear, anxiety and doubt; arrived to a place of acceptance;

Acceptance that she was a necessary component for this prophecy to be fulfilled; although she may have still been somewhat in the dark as to why;

Acceptance that somehow, somewhere God would take her darkened soul and produce a measure of hope that she would not be able to contain;

Allowing her to now begin to fully praise the Lord;

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant
she said!

This is the Holy moment that we all will receive when we
go through this purging process church;

This I believe is why God also dropped in my Spirit to
make us look at our darkness;

To invite us to explore our darkness;

To challenge us to wrestle with our darkness;

To encourage us to name our darkness;

So that by the time you and I get through this difficult
process of examining the good, bad and the ugly of our
own darkness; whatever it may be;

Through this purging process, you and I will come out on
the other side better as a result.

**A little story I would like to share with you as it
pertains to the holy moments that come as a result of
us going through this purging process;**

This week our worship team has been experiencing our
own darkness;

The darkness of realizing as we taped our Christmas Eve services for both 5pm and 7pm that we were yet again preparing for an empty sanctuary; letting us know that this Christmas was really going to be different, there is no way around it.

This reality cannot be escaped...

This reality cannot be dismissed.....

Creating a lot of emotions as a result from this sobering reality.

For we ourselves are strained;

We are stressed;

We are worried about our effectiveness to still be able to provide a transformative experience for our worship community that we all have been called to serve in some capacity;

And I need to be frank with you....the darkness is starting to wear on us;

For we still have some of the same worries that some of you might have as it pertains to finances, sickness, family and relationship struggles and more;

So I say all of this not so that you will feel sorry for us;

But I will ask as your spiritual leader for you to continue to pray for us;

For I know that together as a whole; we will get through the darkness;

But there will be some repair work that will need to be done;

For all of us are experiencing trauma like never before;

This is our universal reality;

For it is nearly impossible for this type of darkness not to wear on the soul at some point;

So pray for us as we continue to pray for you.....because I can see as their leader that the darkness is beginning to take its toll;

But in all of this just when I thought the vastness of the darkness was about to overshadow my light; a Holy Moment came for me as I am still wrestling in this purging process;

The epiphany of beginning a journey beginning January 1, 2020 that will invite myself and others on my personal Facebook page to administer 30 days of self-care to our souls;

All are invited in this challenge; but the idea is to take at least 10 minutes a day to do something that will nurture our soul; long bubble bath, journaling and so forth;

So I have sort of begun this process sooner than later and part of my self-care process led me to Lindsey; the owner of Lovely L- Lash Extensions/Wax services and more located on 17th and O.

As a side note, Lindsey and I have been very careful during this pandemic as we follow all safety and health measures and we have both been tested frequently for Covid and we are well;

But anyhow on Friday, I had an appointment at noon with her;

I text Lindsey to let her know I was running late because you all this has been a very emotional and stressful week for me;

So I was on the phone with one of my spiritual confidantes; sharing the details of how hard this Holy Darkness sermon series has been for me;

All of this time, Lindsey who does not belong to a church home was able to listen in on this call;

When I was done with the call, she teared up and said that she was so grateful that I am her client;

She told me that she looks forward to seeing me and she is inspired by the deep conversations her and I have been having surrounding faith and spirituality;

At the same time Lindsey has been caring and nurturing my soul, by taking extra special care to make me the best self I can be on the outside;

But that is not all church;

For Lindsey also ministered to my soul on the inside that afternoon;

The Holy moment that I experienced after the end of a horrific soul purging week, was the answer that I needed as to whether I was built for the challenges that will continue to come with ministry as we navigate together in this new world filled with darkness;

The Holy Moment is I met a new friend who gave me the biggest gift that I needed for such a time as this;

Lindsey reminded me why I said yes to God in the first place;

For if someone can be inspired as a result of the gifts that God has bestowed upon me, then I realize that I must keep going on with a spirit of hope and faith that I am just enough for such as time as this;

I share all of this with you inviting you to discover your own Lindsey moments during this dark journey;

For just because we are not in church the way we may like to be in the church;

Lindsey reminds us that the church is not closed;

For we are the church;

And the church is wherever we decide to go!

Lastly I'd like to publicly thank Lindsey and lift up her business and her husband and thank her for being a new friend who was there for me;

For just when I thought my light was about to be snuffed out by the darkness;

Lindsey without knowing it; reignited my Light!

Let the church say Amen!

Sunday, December 20, 2020:

Sermon :Holy Darkness Part 2

Scriptures: Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are continuing with our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series inviting us to examine the darkness contained within the scriptures whether it is symbolic or literal week to week and discover the Holy moments that are within those dark moments;

And this week we are looking closer at Mary's story;

And the darkness that I am finding in this passage of scripture is implicit;

But I will pick up where I left off in the earlier Part 1 of this message and name that the darkness we are exploring is the darkness that sometimes comes with our soul;

Now in the earlier service that I highly encourage you to listen to at some point addressed our soul individually; And just to reiterate the 8:30 service will typically address scripture as it pertains to the individual;

Where I am lead though to explore in Mary's story in our gospel today; is looking at the soul of the church;

Before unpacking this concept that the Spirit of the Lord has revealed to me, let me first give you some background on what is going on in our passage of scripture today;

Gabriel, the same angel that had foretold to Zechariah the birth of John the Baptist, now announced to Mary the birth of Jesus.

This announcement took place **in the sixth month** after Zechariah's vision.

This is the only passage which indicates that John was six months older than Jesus.

Mary was living in **a city of Galilee, named Nazareth.**

This expression is found only in Luke and fits in with the

fact that he was writing to Gentiles unfamiliar with Palestine.

The angel Gabriel was sent from God **to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph** (v. 27).

The interval between betrothal and marriage was commonly a year, during which the bride lived with her friends. But her property was vested in her future husband, and unfaithfulness on her part was punished, like adultery, with death.”

Joseph was **of the house of David**.

Since Jesus was the legal, though not actual, son of Joseph, this made Him the “son of David”—a title which is given Him a number of times in the Gospels.

As a side note It is also probable that He was a blood descendant of David through Mary His mother commentators reveal.

So in dramatizing Mary’s story; the angel suddenly appeared to Mary, as he had done to Zechariah, and

greeted her with the words: **Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee** (v. 28).

The Roman Catholic hymn, *Ave Maria* (“Hail, Mary”), dating in its present form from the sixteenth century, is based on this verse.

Thou that art highly favored is all one word in the Greek. It is translated in the Vulgate *gratia plena*, “full of grace.” This church became the basis of the idea that Mary could bestow grace on those who supplicated her.

Quite naturally, Mary was **troubled**—“greatly troubled,” a stronger word than in verse 12—and **cast in her mind** (“considered” or “reasoned”) **what manner of salutation this might be**; that is, “what it might signify.”

Mary did not have long to wait.

For the angel cushioned the coming shock with the same comforting words he had used with Zechariah (v. 13: **Fear not**; literally, “stop being afraid”).

Then came the shattering announcement—to a pure virgin—of verse 31. The son to be born to her would be **great**

(cf. v. 15), **and shall be called** (“shall be”) **the Son of the Most High**

The question Mary asked in reply (v. 34) was inevitable.

The thing the angel had announced was biologically impossible. But theology is above and beyond biology.

The answer which the angel gave (v. 35) is simple, clear and beautiful.

The Holy Spirit would take the place of the human father.

The language here is reminiscent of Genesis 1:2—“and the Spirit of God was brooding upon the face of the waters.”

It was altogether fitting that the Holy Spirit, who was the active Agent in the original creation, should thus inaugurate a New Creation, the Christ of God.

So that is the story of a portion of Mary’s journey from a historical standpoint;

So if you made it this far in my sermon....congratulations

because I shared a lot of history on her;

But let me share with you how this passage reflects to me the soul of the church.

Because as a mother, it is impossible for me not to be drawn to the actual birthing process that Mary must have been experiencing;

Because I stopped by to share that I was a miserable pregnant woman; both times with my hearts Shaya and Keera (show 1st pic and 2nd picture)

I had “morning” sickness that occurred at all times of the day for pretty much the entire pregnancy.

There were times I did not think I could carry the girls as my bones were always aching and sore.

At the end, it was worth it;

For my girls are beautiful inside and out;

I know that great things will come from both of them and it is a privilege to be their mother.

And so it was in this personal reflection of Mary’s birthing experience that we will soon recall on Christmas Eve how anxiety filled it must have been for Mary;

No midwife, no medical equipment, no epidural.....

I can’t even imagine;

But this is where my aha moment comes and I am headed to make what will hopefully be a powerful connection to my birthing story, Mary's birth story; Elizabeth's birth story is this;

I am certain that both women would share this sentiment if they were still here to tell their own story that all of the pain, the Braxton hicks all of it; was worth the promise that our babies would fulfill and bring;

For my declaration is that I would go through that grueling process over and over and over again for Shaya and Keera without hesitation;

For the joy my girls bring to me is immeasurable;

And tying this to the soul of the church;

I believe that is what these dark times are going to reveal to us all;

For I know that some of us may not be as hope filled as they might like to be during a time such as this;

In fact some of you may be asking yourself, "when is Kirstie going to get off of this darkness series"

For I know what darkness is, I am living it right now some might suggest;

And my response is I get this I do;

But my aha moment is similar to the message that I preached earlier to the individual heart;

That the birthing process of Mary is for me right now a powerful symbol of the state of our church;

For as a church during this pandemic like most churches; we are experiencing one of the roughest metaphorical birthing experiences like never before;

Because **right now as a church**, things are as grueling as the “waves of nausea” during my pregnancies were to my body;

Right now as a church, we are experiencing a heavy burden to carry and it is beginning to take its toll on a lot of us;

But I stopped by to suggest that **we need to say in the darkness just a little bit longer**, because there is some major developments that need to occur;

We need to stay in the darkness a little longer,

because something powerful is being birthed that I cannot explicitly name;

Just as I could not really understand what exactly was going on in my womb as the girls were growing daily in my womb;

I mean yes there is information that will give some idea what is being formed within the baby week to week;

But the reality is that as parents and guardians and loved ones; waiting on the birth of babies; we are not really sure that all worked out until that child is born;

Either way; just as in the literal pregnancy; the church is in a similar process where **we are called to stay in this womb of darkness just a little longer;**

And where the revelation comes is that just as I could not fast forward my 9 month and 1 week process for both of my children;

I stopped by to suggest, that we too cannot **fast forward** through our own metaphorical birthing experience as a church;

For there still is some spiritual growth and development that some of us are still needing to have during this birthing process;

There is still some fine tuning that I believe can only happen in the birthing process;

There is still some learning that we must glean from these texts that reveal a darkness from the marginalized and the oppressed that simply cannot be escaped;

However, I decree and declare that in all of this, just as a baby was born to Mary and Elizabeth;

The soul of the church will be reborn again;

Now staying in this metaphor just a little longer;
Just as a baby will need to learn to walk, talk, learn, and more;

When our own rebirth happens;

When we get through this pandemic experience;

There will still be some major regrowth that will need to happen;

For the reality is that some people will choose not to return to the First community;

This in itself is never easy but I stopped by to state that it will inevitably occur;

Furthermore the way that we will have to adapt and adjust will be just as a baby will have to learn to speak, walk and talk;

The church is going to have to learn how to speak to a world that has been torn apart through a variety of injustices;

We are going to have to learn how to walk with our communities that have been ravaged by the darkness through lost jobs, decreased wages, and shut down businesses;

We are going to have to think with a healthy dose of reality and a spirit of optimism because there will be change;

There will be adjustments;

There will be discomfort;

There will be grief;

There will be difficult transitions;

We will have to rebuild;

We will have to rethink;

We will have to let go of some of our resistance to evolve;

For when we all have gone through a darkness such as this;

It will be impossible to go completely back to the way things once were;

In fact I am becoming more and more convinced that we are not supposed to go completely back to the way things were,

For the darkness has revealed too much;

Some of the things that the darkness has produced; we just can't unsee;

So for those wondering why I would dare preach about the darkness in the midst of this Advent season?

My response is that I will not stop preaching about the darkness until everyone is able to have access to the light!

I can't completely fulfill my role of leading this church to the light until we have allowed the lessons that we have learned in the thickness of our darkness to transform our hearts, minds and souls; so that we can prepare for the birth of what this darkness will produce;

But the Holy moment through all of this is that a major rebirth will happen;

And just as I am excited for how my girls will impact the world;

I stopped by to say that First UMC Lincoln, through our rebirth; we will impact the world in a mighty way;

Because of having gone through this darkness together;

Because of having gone through this critical

developmental birthing process together that I believe our church community desperately needed;

We will be stronger;

We will be wiser;

We will be awakened; which is our upcoming sermon series in January;

We will be a powerful force of love that will truly impact our community and world;

Because now hopefully we will be able to understand the darkness like never before;

Because we have done the tough work of facing the darkness although it has not been easy;

And just when we think we can't stand the darkness anymore;

Just when the contractions of the darkness becomes too much to bear;

A powerful rebirth will come like never before;

Allowing us all who have been waiting in the darkness during this difficult Advent season to recognize that the time spent in the darkness was well worth it;

This is the Holy Moment that I am looking to experience;

This is the Holy Moment worth staying in the darkness just a little longer because through our rebirth; we will

discover that all of the trials; all of the fears; all of the pain;
all of the uncertainties; has cemented the path for the
church of Christ to be