

December 13, 2020-“Holy Darkness” Part 1

8:30am-Isaiah 61: 1-4,8-11

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are continuing in our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series where each week we will attempt to name the darkness within the scriptures; whether it be symbolic, abstract, figurative or literal and identify the holy moments and opportunities that are within the darkness.
- So to unpack the darkness within our Isaiah passage, I will begin first with a text message exchange that Morgan and I had when I preached on evil a few weeks ago; where Morgan asked me, what does evil look like and how does evil manifest itself?
- The rationale that I gathered behind his question was him exploring the question of whether or not evil is something you and I intentionally subscribe to and act upon or not?
- And I would suppose that the answer to Morgan’s question really goes back to how one processes the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

- And to give some explanation on what the Wesleyan quadrilateral is; The **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**, or Methodist **Quadrilateral**, is a methodology for theological reflection that is credited to John Wesley, leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th century.
- The term itself was coined by 20th century American Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler.
- So according to John Wesley, there are four lens of reference that you and I approach and attempt to understand scripture;(1) Scripture, (2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience.
- For United Methodists, **Scripture** is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine.
- **Tradition** is experience and the witness of development and growth of the faith through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures.
- **Experience** is the individual's understanding and appropriating of the faith in the light of his or her own life.
- **Through reason** the individual Christian brings to bear on the Christian faith discerning and cogent thought.
- **These four elements** taken together, bring the individual Christian to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith and the required response of worship and service.

- **Furthermore what all of this has to do with our scripture today and our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series that is seeking to find the holy moments in our darkest times;**
- Is that the darkness that I am finding within our passage today; a passage that on the surface is a pretty optimistic passage, as it is providing a hope filled message that relief will soon be delivered to the people of Jerusalem;
- The verse of darkness that I am finding and as a result caused me to recall my text conversation with Morgan, occurs in verse 1 NIV, where it says *the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
- So you see church, the darkness that is explicitly named in this verse for me and declaring it indirectly to be evil or undesirable, centers around the people who were identified to be poor, broken-hearted ,A captives and prisoners.
- The Word implicitly names that there was darkness that existed for these people.

- Causing me to raise Morgan's question again but I will ask it in a different manner; **did these people** cause the darkness upon themselves?
- **Was there darkness** that they willingly subscribed to or yielded to within their lives?
- **Was this darkness** something they could control or was it forced upon them?
- And so the reason why I named the Wesleyan quadrilateral as being a component for us to consider, is because although the Bible names in the beginning that we were all created by God to worship God;
- Somewhere along the lines, we begin to see somewhat of a theological crisis arise between God and humanity in the story of the Garden of Eden; where we soon learn that not all is well and copacetic in the garden between God and humanity.
(Genesis 2 and 3)
- And this is because the story reveals that God instructed humanity that they could eat from every tree except the tree that contains the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:17)
- And where the Wesleyan quadrilateral comes into play is about now, because I stopped by to suggest that not everyone views Adam and Eve's "disobedience" in this story in the same manner;

- For when the story reveals that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit and was then banished from the Garden as a result;
- Our Methodist tradition would view the story of Adam and Eve as the Fall of Humanity, where sin is being introduced in the world by way of the serpent being able to convince Adam and Eve to disobey God. (Genesis 3:4)
- As a result, I have personally observed different faith traditions apply their own theological take on the role of the serpent in the story;
- Some might suggest that humanity was not evil until the serpent or the devil introduced evil to them.
- For example, it was very common in my first church experience where I was the Associate Pastor of Saint Mark in Wichita, where language of the Enemy was highly used and attributed to as being the Author of sin.
- This "devil made me do it theology" was just as prevalent as the Holy Spirit in the context I was trained in.
- Making it very difficult to detect if the theology was truly that sin was persuasive because the devil was the instigator or does humanity have a role on being evil without the assistance of some mediator such as Satan needed?

- When I moved to Nebraska, I seldom heard sin or Satan preached at all.
- It was obvious that evil was attributed to a person's free will choice;
- This is not to suggest that there was not some sort of influence out there that perhaps swayed the individual one way or the other;
- However, at the end of the day, the understanding with this theological take is that the person still and always will have a choice in the matter.
- Finally, there is another school of thought that I have encountered quite a bit since moving to Nebraska;
- This idea that everyone is innately good and that if they do possess some dark/evil ways, it is subconsciously;
- In other words, with this school of thought, the idea is that a person never intended to come off as evil or unkind.
- And there are other school of thoughts out there as it pertains to evil; I just thought it helpful to name a few that might be good food for thought.
- So in all of this, which doctrine of evil is the accurate one?
- And my gut response is to say that the answer is complex, mainly because the Wesleyan quadrilateral reminds me that every one's tradition, reason and human experience is different;

- But when I turn to the Word which is supposed to serve as the main foundation for our faith and the Wesleyan quadrilateral, I do believe that the answer would include possibly all of the above.
- For the Word tells us that there in Ephesians 6: 12 that *For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.*
- So how this scripture speaks to me personally is to let me know that there are many spiritual influences that exist in our world;
- For there is a force of love and there is a force of evil that exists;
 - And I love the rethink Church campaign that the Methodist Church had on the subject evil a couple of years back, recognizing evil as a force that convinces us that we are more important than God.
- **It is the force** which compels us to believe that our own desires trump love, peace and justice.
- **It is this force** that tells us that our value is negotiable and it is up to us to protect and defend that value.
- So I do think it is important for us to name that just as love exists, evil exists.

- However, as Jesus was in the garden being tempted by Satan(Matthew 4:1); Jesus shows us that we in our free will choice have the power by the Holy Spirit to resist the evil temptations that surrounds us.
- Finally Paul I believe names this spiritual warfare the best when he says in Romans 7: 19; *For what I **do** is not the good I **want to do**; no, the evil I **do not want to do**--this I keep on **doing**. Now if I **do** what I **do not want to do**, it is no longer I who **do** it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: **When I want to do** good, evil is **right** there with me.*
- And David gives me life goals on how to confront the evil that exists within us when he says in Psalms 51:10-11; *Create in me a pure heart, O **God**, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your **salvation** and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*
- So taking all of this in, my response would be that evil and darkness within a person although may be complex how it manifests itself, I believe that there is enough scriptural evidence to suggest that evil has existed almost simultaneously when love existed;
- In the beginning; darkness and evil's presence was there;

- The symbolism of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil tells us that evil was there.
- **Now how evil manifests itself within ourselves gets a little murky for me;**
- For I believe that evil/darkness impacts us differently based on our human experiences;
- For instance I saw a documentary a couple of years back called *Three Identical Strangers*; that really did a fine job of raising the concept of Nature vs. Nurture and studying the development of genetically identical siblings raised in differing socioeconomic circumstances.
- In this documentary, the triplets were separated from birth and adopted as infants.
- The outcome was that although all three of the men suffered from some aspect of mental illness; the two that were in the more loving and financially stable household thrived better than the third brother who was verbally and emotionally abused by his father resulting in the third brother ultimately committing suicide.
- So I mention this to suggest that sometimes we can find ourselves in dark places and because of our upbringing, it may

be difficult to see our way out of the darkness; especially if darkness is all that we may know;

- For some darkness is believed to be the only option;
- For instance, if it is a matter of eating or stealing to eat; for some although it is wrong to steal; darkness feels to be the only option;
- Another example; I have read stories and encountered people who got released out of prison; tried to do things the right way, but because of them having limited job options for certain crimes/charges; the person ends up back in prison again; hence why our country still struggles with a high recidivism rate.
- And for those who have never had some of these socio-economic realities; the darkness that I am describing can be unfathomable;
- For those who have never faced these moral and ethical dilemmas, the darkness is black and white for them;
- Right is right and wrong is wrong;
- For we all have choices is what some might suggest;
- And I will say that the older I get and the longer I serve in ministry and become aware of the stories behind the broken hearted, the marginalized, the oppressed and the prisoners that

our gospel is mentioning; the lines are not as apparent in my heart as perhaps they once were;

- I am not as quick to making snap judgments as I might have once done, after my serving in Puerto Rico as they had to rely on the sun to warm their water;
- I am not seeing the colors of black and white as clearly when I have witnessed the broken have to decide whether or not to purchase needed medication or a meal;
- And for the extreme cases of hearing the stories of those who have committed serious crimes;
- In the difficult instances of hearing the stories of those who have committed dare I say unthinkable crimes;
- Hearing the darkness that often surrounded those who have committed those crimes in most of what I would describe as dark upbringings; although I do not condone the crime by any means, what I have found myself doing is paying just as much attention to the darkness as the crime itself;
- **I have found myself paying more attention** to the darkness that surrounds the broken and down trodden;
- **I have found myself paying attention to the darkness** that surrounds myself and resides within myself.
- **I have found myself forcing myself** to see the darkness; forcing myself to name the darkness; so that I can capture the

essence of God's heart to want to forgive the darkness; so that I can understand God's mission to deliver us all from the darkness; so that I can understand my purpose in overcoming the darkness;

- How can this great work be done by God and on behalf of God if we choose not to see the darkness that surrounds us and resides within us?
- For if we don't take the time to acknowledge the darkness then how can we truly embrace the light?
- If we have difficulties naming the darkness, then how are we able to name the Grace?
- **Because that is the aha moment of our passage today for me church;**
- That we all in many ways have some aspect of darkness that have entered into our hearts;
- Is it from birth or do we learn about darkness over time; this I will leave with you all and myself to continue to discern....
- What I am certain of though as a result of engaging our scripture today is that although we are not sure why darkness existed for these group of people that are being labeled as captives, prisoners and broken-hearted in our text

- And although we may not be sure how we have found ourselves submersed in similar darkness;
- The aha moment and the Holy moment of this passage is that **God still** wanted to deliver them;
- **God still** wanted to restore all that had been destroyed (v4)
- **The Lord still** wanted the best for God's people, regardless of how the darkness manifested itself;
- For whether the darkness stemmed from Nature vs Nurture, a free will choice; whether the darkness was influenced or the darkness was thought to be the last resort;
- The scripture and holy moment of this passage for me is that God's covenant with the people of Israel and to the world had not changed;
- **God still** wanted to bind up the brokenhearted,
- **God still** wanted to proclaim freedom for the captives,
- **God still** wanted a release from darkness for the prisoners,
- Letting me know that this is the ministerial obligation that we have both individually and collectively;
- **To have a ministry that still** offers liberty;
- **To have a ministry that still** offers a possibility for transformation;
- **To have a ministry that still** offers a possibility for renewal;

- For me this is what Christ's Resurrection on Earth as it is in heaven is all about;
- Regardless of how the darkness may have manifested itself;
- In spite of how vast the darkness may be;
- God's love for God's children can never be overtaken by the darkness;
- God's promises in our passage of scripture which extends to all of us today, is a ministry that offers to undo the evils brought on by the darkness, and give new life and joy in living.
- This is the grace of God at God's finest;
- This is the Good News that we must continue to share!
- Let the Church say Amen!

December 13,2020;10:45am- Ps 126

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Sermon: Holy Darkness Part 2

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are continuing with our Holy Darkness sermon series; a series that is seeking to identify and explore the darkness that is contained within our weekly scripture; whether the darkness may be literal, figurative, symbolic or spiritual and identify the holy moments that are within the darkness.
- And looking at our gospel today, we are essentially witnessing the same gospel as last week in Mark 1; where John the Baptist is calling out into the wilderness with a sense of urgency; to encourage people to repent and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

- The difference though in this passage of scripture today is that we are witnessing the baptism from John the Baptist perspective.
- And so before jumping into the text, I think it is important to name exactly who John the Baptist was;
- John the Baptist was a prophet in the truest sense of the word.
- He could feel the pulse of things around him; he had his ear tuned both to the world around him and to God; and his entire life and ministry sounded out God's message of salvation—the forgiveness of sins and the baptism by the Holy Spirit.
- Perhaps John recognized the fact that he had been signally endued with the Spirit all through his life, sensing a dynamic flowing through him which was not available to the average man.
- Be that as it may, he did envision the work of the Spirit as being applicable to all people.

- He had experienced the Spirit's anointing for his specialized calling; the day would come when all could be partakers of the Spirit for the task of normal living.
- This thought helps us to understand what Jesus meant when He said that John the Baptist was one of the greatest of men, yet less than the least of those in the kingdom of God.
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- **And so that was who John was which then may help us to understand John's perspective more fully;**
- For looking at our gospel this morning we are actually seeing John's perspective play out as a testimony given in the most forthright way before priests and Levites who were sent from Jerusalem to question him.
- For John the Baptist disclaimed being the Christ, Elijah (whose bodily return the Jews expected), or even a prophet; (verse 21)

- In the people's minds however, John should have claimed to be one of them in order to validate his authority to baptize;
- But rather than answering them directly, John seized the opportunity to announce the presence among them of One whose work would exceed the fullest significance of Jewish baptism.
- That One was as much more worthy than John himself as a man is more worthy than his shoe lace.
- **And this unworthiness that John describes is where his testimony ends in our gospel today;**
- And so it would be, this is where the exploration of darkness begins for me;
- Because where I am finding darkness worth exploring in John's story is the darkness that produces feelings of unworthiness, shame, ineptness;
- **A darkness that** John the Baptist felt was his specialized calling to draw out and denounce;

- **A darkness that** John the Baptist felt passionate about identifying and conquering so that **The life would become the light of humanity.**
- Because for John the Baptist, Jesus was both life and light.
- Life and light, as we experience them, are interdependent.
- The life of which John spoke was eternal life, the life of God who revealed God's self to humanity, and was thus light to the sin-darkened world.
- For John, the world is darkness; Christ is light.
- Where life and light correspond to grace and truth (1:7): the fact of what God has done and the understanding of it.
- The acceptance of this life brings one into the light, the knowledge of God.

- **Furthermore, bringing up the conversation that I started in the earlier sermon;**
- A conversation on Isaiah 61 that explored the question of what does evil look like and how does evil manifest itself?
- A conversation that may have been uncomfortable for some of us; mainly because conversations about the evil and darkness that resides in humanity is not something that is easy to talk about;
- After taking in John's testimony, I realized that as a church we are doing a great injustice if we don't talk about the darkness.
- I realized that we will not be able to fully accomplish the mission of Jesus prophesied in Isaiah 61; to proclaim good news to the poor; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim freedom for the captives
· *and release from darkness for the prisoners;* if we cannot learn how to talk about the darkness;

- **For my aha moment from the earlier sermon was that evil has been here just as long as love.**
- In the story of Adam and Eve; the symbolism of the tree of knowledge of good and evil tells us that evil has always been here;
- And looking at the efforts of God in this story of Creation to shield humanity from this knowledge of evil, it is becoming more and more apparent why perhaps God who is like a loving parent to us wanted to do so;
- Because the truth of the matter is that once evil is unleashed; it can be difficult to contain;
- Once evil is metaphorically let out of the bag; it is nearly impossible to get it back into the bag;
- Leaving churches all over with a huge theological task and challenge of how we address this problem of evil;
- So this is why I appreciate the Methodist Church because through my ordination process; just as I

was asked to write a 3-4 page response on the significance of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and love and grace; I was also asked to write a similar page requirement for evil;

- For the Methodist Church, it is important for them to make sure that us pastors are aware that Evil is here; that Evil has always been here;
- For the Methodist Church, it is important that pastors are able to articulate a sound doctrine concerning evil and darkness, so that our ministry can help to lead the people to the path of light;
 - I will reiterate the Rethink Church Methodist response from my earlier sermon that I really resonate with; recognizing evil as a force that convinces us that we are more important than God.
- **It is the force** which compels us to believe that our own desires trump love, peace and justice.
- **It is this force** that tells us that our value is negotiable and it is up to us to protect and defend that value.
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- So again I think it is important for us to name that just as love exists, evil exists.
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- (Fyi, I expound more of my doctrine of evil in the first sermon)
- This church is the ministry that John the Baptist was called to;
- This is the ministry that we are all called to;
- **A ministry that** names the darkness for what it is;
- **A ministry that** can openly talk about the darkness and all of the emotions that come with it;
- **A ministry that might** even dare accept that darkness is here; for many of us, darkness is where it began;
- **For many of us** have been bound up in the darkness;
- **Many of us** have been wrestling with the darkness like Jacob wrestled in the darkness with the Angel;

- **Many of us** have been like the captives where nothing but darkness surrounded us as we cried out to be set free;
- **Many of us** have been stuck in a rut of shame and feelings of unworthiness because of the darkness;
- But even in all of this, I stopped by to suggest that our ministry still needs to name the reality of the darkness that exists;
- We can't shy away from it;
- We can't ignore it;
- **For if we ignore the darkness**, we undermine the light;
- **If we dismiss that darkness is there**, then we also dismiss a major component of the Grace that God bestowed upon humanity;
- **For the darkness** is a relevant and essential part of our story;
- **The darkness** is a relevant and essential part of our faith;

- A faith that says that God so loved the World, that God gave the world God's Son Jesus;
- **In the midst of the darkness**, God gave us the Light of Christ;
- **In spite of the darkness**, God's love was birthed in a manger and grew up to be a force that could not be reckoned with;
- **Through the darkness**, God's love became a force determined to seek out all of God's sheep that have wandered into the darkness;
- **In the thickness of the darkness**, God's love became a force so determined, that it met us at our metaphorical wells of shame like the Samaritan woman;
- **God's love became a force** that pulled us out of our darkness one person at a time,
- Over 2000 years ago, God began to call us out of the darkness; tax collectors, fishermen and more;

- Fast forwarding to today, **God still is calling us out** of the darkness one by one;
- **God is calling us out** of the darkness to serve in the midst of the darkness; finance committee, small groups, lay leader and more;
- And this is all done in the midst of the darkness because **without the darkness**, the prophecy is incomplete;
- **Without the darkness**, the possibility of a transformation is virtually impossible;
- So again, we are called to lead a ministry that can name the darkness;
- So that God's glory can claim the darkness;
- David said it best in Psalm 40:1-2; where he said
- *I waited patiently for the Lord;*
- *he turned to me and heard my cry.*
- **2**
- *He lifted me out of the slimy pit,*
- *out of the mud and mire;*
- *he set my feet on a rock*

- ***and gave me a firm place to stand.***
- This is the holy moment of our darkness church;
- This is the holy purpose of our darkness;
- Let the Church Say Amen!