

Giving thanks in the Darkness

Psalm 30

Everton Hills

13 August 2017

Jesus hung on the cross. Cold. Battered. Bruised. He had entered this life to bring hope to a broken world. In response he was whipped and jeered. A crown of thorns pierced the flesh in his skull. Nails were driven through his hands and feet.

Have you ever wondered what he must have thought at that time?

We get a clue, when he cries out, “Eli Eli Lema Sabachtani... my God my God why have you abandoned me”... They are not words of comfort. They are not words that are saying “chin up, everything is going to be OK”. They are honest words. They are broken words. Words of darkness and coldness and emptiness. Words reflected in something that Mother Theresa wrote in 1957, ***“I am told God lives in me, and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”***

Have you felt that way?

One of my problems with the church today is that sometimes we are simply not real. Sometimes I think we are frauds and fakes and liars. We paint a picture of life being rosy. We sing songs about how good God is. How he is always there for us. We walk around with smiles on our faces... and yet, in the midst of our community are people, in the midst of God’s community are people, who are broken and dark and cold and empty and frustrated.

Do you notice them? Maybe one of them is you.

They could be sitting next to you this morning... or on your seat... But you would possibly never know because we’ve learned the importance of putting on masks, of hiding our hurts, our fears our frustrations...

Way back in the late 1500’s a mystic called St John of the Cross described this experience as **‘la noche oscura’... the dark night... ‘the dark night of the soul’**.

Frightening, isn’t it? It’s not the sort of thing that people feel comfortable talking about, or even acknowledging. Especially in a church that talks about the life that Jesus gives. As a matter of fact, I even had multiple thoughts regarding talking about this today... because this is the tough part of the Christian journey.

Yet, as Jesus went through that dark night on the cross, as Mother Theresa faced it in her walked, that journey through the dark night is one that all Christians must traverse, if indeed they are to mature.

As we continue this journey through the Psalms, we cannot help but talk about this dark night of the soul. The Psalms are full of this journey.

Psalm 6:6 I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears.

Psalm 42:3 My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

Psalm 69:3 I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; My eyes fail while I wait for my God.

Time after time, this journey of the dark night of the soul shouts out its pain. It implores us to take note of the reality of the human condition. Following God does not always make life easier... but it can make life more meaningful, more significant. And it can lead to an awareness of the presence of God in that dark night.

So today, I want you to hear this reality... that this “dark night of the soul” is actually a gift... an invitation, if you like, to walk boldly into those moments of discomfort, those moments of doubt, those moments of being unsettled, those moments of anxiety and fear... and listen carefully to hear God’s presence within them.

Perhaps you remember the song, **“I’m going on a bear hunt”**. Do you remember how it goes?

We're goin' on a bear hunt (We're goin' on a bear hunt)
We're going to catch a big one, (We're going to catch a big one,)
I'm not scared (I'm not scared)
What a beautiful day! (What a beautiful day!)

Uh-uh!
Grass!
Long wavy grass.
We can't go over it.
We can't go under it.
Oh no!
We've got to go through it!
Swishy swashy! Swishy swashy! Swishy swashy

That’s what this dark night invitation is... an invitation to notice God himself walking alongside you through the dark night so that you can, like a resurrection shout, discover life and hope on the other side.

Now I need you to understand that there is a difference between the dark night of the soul and clinical depression... “When a person is clinically depressed... she loses her sense of humor and the ability to see comedy in certain situations. The person is also too shut down to reach out to others who are in pain, to offer compassion to others. She can’t see beyond her own discomfort. Clinical depression can render an energetic, sensitive person apathetic so that all her senses are disabled. Her very being seems to disappear beneath her illness. With a dark night of the soul, the person stays in tact, even though she is hurting. While a person in the midst of a dark night of the soul knows, on some level, there is a purpose to the pain, the depressed person is embittered and wants to be relieved immediately.” (Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*)

The dark night of the soul is a gift... and while it can be difficult to comprehend how anything that is painful is a gift, let me try to explain.

But growth, true growth, only occurs through struggle.

You've probably heard the story about a man who tried to help a **butterfly out of its cocoon** by slitting the cocoon open. The butterfly that emerged had small, unformed wings, and died soon after. It needed the struggle out of the cocoon to force the fluid into its wings to stretch and open them so that the butterfly could fly. By trying to shortcut the process, the man had instead doomed the creature.

And that is how God works with us. He walks with us into the dark night. He is standing alongside us. He is weeping with us. But he also knows an important truth... this is a journey you must take... because it is through this journey into darkness that true life begins. It is the resurrection principle. As Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat dies, it will not live"

God is where ever suffering is. Not causing suffering. But redeeming it.

And that is what David discovers in Psalm 30.

"I will exalt you, LORD, for you rescued me. You refused to let my enemies triumph over me. O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you restored my health. You brought me up from the grave, O LORD. You kept me from falling into the pit of death." (Psalm 30:1-3, NLT)

Notice what is happening here. There is a confidence in the Psalmist. A confidence to see that despite what has happened in his life, or is happening in his life... God is there with him.

And he does something else. In the midst of the pain, he reminds himself that while life is sometimes just plain crappy, God is always alongside him.

Note that David doesn't spiritualise the bad things.

Many years ago, I heard the story of a successful Pastor who had planted a new church. The church was growing and people were loving each other and really grasping what it means to walk in the presence of God.

One day, and on the same day, both of his boys had accidents and broke an arm. One well meaning parishioner came to him, offering prayer. "You are under spiritual attack, Pastor. We need to pray for your protection from the work of Satan."

This pastor responded... "I am happy for your prayers. But please don't give Satan any credit for what happened. Boys are boys. One fell out of a tree, and the other fell off his bike."

In other words... bad things happen.

But notice what else happens. David shares his dark night with God...

"I cried out to you, O LORD. I begged the Lord for mercy, saying, "What will you gain if I die, if I sink into the grave? Can my dust praise you? Can it tell of your faithfulness? Hear me, LORD, and have mercy on me. Help me, O LORD." (Psalm 30:8-10, NLT)

They are words of a broken heart. They are words of the feeling of abandonment.

But God doesn't leave David there... David rejoices that God rescued him. God healed him. God saved him from his dark night.

“Sing to the LORD, all you godly ones! Praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime! Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Psalm 30:4–5, NLT)

That's what faith is. It holds hope in things that cannot be seen. It keeps hoping despite what circumstances we face in life.

But it does one more thing. One more thing that we so often forget. Especially when we are in the midst of the dark night of the soul.

Faith holds onto us. Faith does not depend on our capacity to keep believing when things are bad. Some think that. But it is so untrue. If it were true then we would simply rely on ourselves in the midst of the dark night... and to be honest, when I am in those dark night spaces, I don't have the energy or the capacity to do that. I need someone holding onto me.

And that is what David says...

“You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!” (Psalm 30:11–12, NLT)

It is God who holds onto us in our dark nights. It is God who refuses to let us go. So while the dark night of the soul is painful, it will not defeat us. **Because the Holy Spirit, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus redeems it.**

It's time to dance.