

“A Light in the Darkness”

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Psalm 40

¹I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. ²He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. ³He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. ⁴Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. ⁵You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. ⁶Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. ⁷Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” ⁹I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. ¹⁰I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. ¹¹Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” ⁴But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.” ⁵And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” ⁷Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Noted preacher and professor of homiletics, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale once went to Hawaii with her husband. While there, they visited Volcanoes National Park, where she found the enormous craters on the top of the mountain intriguing. She said that up close, the craters with steam rising out of them were a lot larger and more threatening-looking than the television pictures that she had seen. They then saw the lava fields that covered the mountainside where the craters had spewed steam and molten rock. They periodically got out of their car to walk across the vast expanse of hard, gray-black rock, sometimes ten to fifteen feet deep, which virtually covered over everything in its path. She said, "The sight of so much barren desolation was so grim; it was depressing. It was as if all hope of life and vitality had been snuffed out when the great mountain erupted."

In our reading from Isaiah today, we hear a hopeful word for those who had been in the grim and depressing times of exile. They had been overtaken by the Babylonians. Their homes and temples were destroyed, their nation was in ruin, and they were in captivity. Where was hope for them? How could they hope when it appeared that God had abandoned them? With their future looking as bleak as a lava field, why hope at all?

That's a pretty good question. Why should they hope – why should *we* hope? It can be hard to hope when you look around and see conflict and misery in the world. It can be even harder to hope when you see conflict and misery in your own life. It is difficult to hope when you see only the vast lava fields of life around you. And yet, it is in these times that we are told to sing. Yes, sing! If we look just six verses after our reading from Isaiah ended today, we find this "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones." (Is 49:13) Right in the midst of the suffering of captivity in exile, the Hebrews hear a word of hope, promise, and new life where no one would expect to find any hope. But God can turn the darkness into light! At this point in their

history, the tribes of Israel have been scattered. God says in verse 6 “it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light *to the nations*, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Bringing back the Jewish people into one nation is not enough; instead, God has in mind bigger things – the salvation of the whole earth. God says His servant will be a “light to the nations.” In the darkness shines a light.

We all have experienced the dark times. There are times in our lives when God’s presence seems far away. This is not new. The Hebrews knew it. The ancients knew it. Saint John of the Cross knew it in the 16th century when he wrote a poem called *Dark Night of the Soul*. That phrase has become a shorthand for a particular crisis of faith, a point in one’s spiritual life when there is a certain loneliness and desolation.

The Psalmist knew of darkness. One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 13. It is one of those passages that people are amazed to find in their Bibles. The psalmist says:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

You are not alone when you cry out to God. When you cannot feel the presence of God, you can say with the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?” And then demand “Answer me, O Lord my God!” I see the psalmist with a fist toward Heaven, yelling “Answer me!” We all know darkness. And yet, Psalm 13 concludes with these lines:

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

In the midst of the darkness, we can hope. We can remember that our God is good. We can sing to the Lord with hearts filled with hope. We are not alone.

The psalmist knew of darkness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew of darkness. Bonhoeffer was a theologian and pastor in Germany who was arrested and imprisoned, and later sent to a Nazi concentration camp. He was executed in the camp after being imprisoned for two years. While imprisoned, he was a great inspiration to his fellow prisoners, and even to the guards. He saw every day as a day to serve and thank God, even in prison. Shortly before his death, he wrote a prayer of thanksgiving and praise. In it, he says "I cannot do this alone. In me there is darkness, but with you there is light." Even in the midst of a concentration camp, Bonhoeffer pointed us to the light of God. He continues:

I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways,
But you know the way for me...
Enable me to live now
That I may answer before you and before men.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised. Amen

Bonhoeffer knew his own limitations, and God's *limitless* possibilities. He knew that God's light was the answer to his dark night. And he knew that the most important thing is that God's name be praised, whatever the day might bring. He knew where to find God in the midst of the lava field.

And we've learned that even Mother Teresa knew of the dark night of the soul. In letters to her superiors that were released in 2007, Mother Teresa spoke of very often not even feeling God's presence. In the midst of the suffering and poverty which she took on, she often called out to God and did not receive an answer. She wrote letters to a few trusted priests, sometimes detailing her prayers. The smiling Mother Teresa in photos and videos we've all seen indicates nothing of this. Other nuns working closely with her for decades did not know of the dark period of her life. In the midst of her own private suffering, she did not lose her faith. In the darkness, she clung to her purpose, saying to God, "if this brings You glory — if souls are brought to you — with joy I accept all to the end of my life." She found joy in fulfilling God's purpose for her life, even while not feeling God's presence. One priest shared with her that feeling Jesus is not the only proof of his being there and that her very craving for God was a "sure sign" of his "hidden presence" in her life. And so, she carried on her tasks of serving God's people, almost always with a smile. In the midst of the lava field, she could, like the Hebrews, "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing!"

And the man whose birthday and life we celebrate tomorrow, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., certainly knew of darkness. He fought for justice and equality, and he suffered for his stand. He lived under the threat of assassination and some of his last speeches seem to indicate he knew the end was near. Two months before he was killed, he told his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta that he'd been thinking about his funeral. He told them not to let the preacher talk about his Nobel Peace Prize or other awards. He said "I'd like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like someone to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to be able to say that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to

say that I tried to love and serve humanity.” He closed by saying he wanted to “make of this old world a new world.” Dr. King, who lived under attack, knew of great darkness. Yet, he tried to live his life in service of God and others. He found the light of God in service, in seeking to bring us all together. He found light in trying to “make of this old world a new world.”

And so, if the Hebrews can find joy in God while in Exile, if Dietrich Bonhoeffer can find joy in God while in a concentration camp, if Mother Teresa can find joy in serving God among the poor, if Dr. King can find joy in God in the midst of great hostility, it gives us hope. It gives us hope that, in the lava fields of our own lives, we can find joy in God. For if you look carefully at the cracks of the lava, you’ll see tiny shoots of new plants growing there. In the midst of the desolation of a volcano comes new life.

God is there. God cares. Even in the dark night, there is light. A “light to the nations, that God’s salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Amen