

“Blues in the Night/ The Dark Night of the Soul”

Larry Reimer

January 22, 2012

The United Church of Gainesville

SCRIPTURE and READINGS

Psalm 22: 1-15 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart The word is a hidden word and comes in the darkness of the night. To enter this darkness put away all voices and sounds all images and likenesses. For no image has ever reached into the soul’s foundation where God herself with her own being is effective.

A woman, so the story goes, asked famed trumpet player Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong to define the blues. “Lady,” he said, “If you have to ask, you’ll never know.”

The same could be said for “the dark night of the soul” a term coined by the medieval mystic, St. John of the Cross. The dark night of the soul is a time when prayer, spiritual practices, and faith no longer seem to connect one with God.

My favorite explanation of that phrase comes from F. Scott Fitzgerald, who said, “In the dark night of the soul, it’s always 3:00 a.m.”

Night, however, is also as important to spiritual growth as the soil is to a seed. Without the night, there is rest, no rhythm to life, no change in perspective. The mystics maintain that the dark night of the soul is essential to a true and deepening faith. But when you’re tossing and turning through the question that will not let itself be answered in the 3:00 a.m. of your soul, the darkness seems endless and miserable.

I’m reminded of a story of a CNN reporter who heard of a devout Jew in Jerusalem who had been going to the Wailing Wall twice a day for 60 years to pray. She asked what he prayed for. He said he prayed daily for peace, that the races and the nations of the world could be one, that Israelis and Palestinians would find their common ground, and that politicians would truth and the good of the people ahead of their own interests.

“How does that feel?” the observer asked.

“Like I’m talking to a damn wall”, replied the devout man.

That’s the dark night of the soul, and it can be quite long. Mother Theresa’s closest friends said she experienced the dark night of the soul most of her adult life.

As we consider our theme, “To an Unknown God” this month, I want to explore a particular arena that sends me into a dark night of my soul, a time when I wonder about God who seems suddenly unknown to me.

The arena of life that shakes my faith is the cruelty and meanness that seem to be embedded in human nature. It’s not about why bad things happen

to good people. That's another question altogether. It's about why people do such bad things themselves.

Paul Slansky, writing a satirical quiz on the Texas Republican Debate last fall in The New Yorker, asked the following question. "Which of these topics failed to draw applause from the debate audience? A. letting people without health insurance die. B. Trying Federal Reserve Board Chairman Ben Bernanke for treason. C. Rick Perry's record of executing people in Texas. And D. Waterboarding.

The answer is that all of them drew applause.

I say this in no way to castigate Republicans, because more than being Republicans, my hunch is that those who applauded would also call themselves devout Christians. And if not Christians, then simply members of the human family, whom I prefer to believe, as Anne Frank is reported to have said, are basically good.

I do not believe in Original Sin. Rather, I believe in Original Blessing. I do not believe that by virtue of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, all humankind is basically doomed to fall, and that the only redemption for us all is by the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

Judaism itself of course contains the Garden of Eden in its scripture, and Jewish faith does not believe that humankind is inherently evil, to be redeemed only by the death of a beloved Messiah.

Much of modern feminist theology finds the doctrine of original sin to be abusive, because it suggests that suffering in and of its self is redemptive and good for us since it is like the suffering of Jesus. Rita Nakishima Brock is just one of many theologians who say that the notion of a God who would create humankind as sinful and then sacrifice a son for this sin is like the scenario of a dysfunctional family.

The doctrine of original sin was cemented into Christian faith by St. Augustine in Rome in the 9th century. But there has always been an undercurrent of dissent within Christianity which has challenged this belief. Britain and France's Celtic Christianity with its celebration of nature and life long opposed the Mediterranean focus on sin and death. In fact the leader of the Celtic Church, Pelagius, who believed humans and nature were essentially good, was summoned to Rome to debate Augustine who believed both humankind and nature were fallen and sinful. The debate actually ended in a tie, which was broken by the pope who voted for Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin. Pelagius was declared a heretic and sent back to Scotland where he basically ignored Augustine and the pope. But in the long run, the medieval church needed the doctrine of Original Sin to keep a feudal population fearful and under its control.

In the early 1980's the American Catholic priest Matthew Fox began writing at length, proclaiming his belief in original blessing. Original blessing affirms humans in blessing, good, like God and that creation is good and to be cherished, rather than something chaotic and evil that needs to be dominated and controlled. Eventually the Catholic Church excommunicated Fox, but he

and many others continue to proclaim Original Blessing as biblically and theologically faithful.

The doctrine that creation itself, not just humankind, is fallen and evil can be seen in the architecture of the Lake Yale Baptist Retreat center where we held so many church retreats. Not a single meeting room, including the big chapel, has windows that let you look out on the lake or even much else of the glory of God's creation. Creation, to them, is synonymous with temptation, and you don't want kids at summer camp to get ideas about all that beauty around them and within them. They believe that humankind was put on earth to control nature, not to listen to it.

When I look for a way to understand the great divide in America right now, and perhaps the world, it appears to be between those who stand for punishment, which revolves around original sin, and those who stand for compassion, which emanates from original blessing.

The dark night of the soul overtakes me when I ponder how so much cruelty occurs in the name of religion and faith. The dark night of my soul surrounds me when I try to maintain my belief in humankind's essential goodness in the midst of so much evil.

In November there was an article in the religion page of the Gainesville Sun with a photo of a smiling pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, the fourth largest Presbyterian Church in America with 4,900 members. Its headline read "Creating a Fellowship: First Presbyterian of Orlando leads churches breaking away from denomination." The article originally from the Orlando Sentinel rather proudly lifts up the courage of this and other Presbyterian Churches for leading the breakaway from the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Why are they leaving the denomination? It's because the denomination voted to allow the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, deacons, and elders. To lead other Presbyterian churches out of their denomination because the denomination welcomes gay pastors is just mean and cruel.

I've always known that compassion was a minority point of view in human history. But that minority perspective has faithfully served to make sure there were times and places where good did overcome evil. Slavery ended. We don't paddle kids in school anymore. Child abuse is illegal in any form. The death penalty is illegal in most developed nations and in 15 states in America. The equality of women is recognized as a moral and legal right. We could all offer our list of triumphs of good over evil.

But then it seems that as a people, we lose the vision of goodness. We regress, and I despair that the vindictive side of our nature is gaining strength again.

Who is my God and how do I keep a faith in the goodness of all people in the face of the meanness of spirit exemplified in the audience at that Texas debate?

This is my dark night of the soul, for if I am wrong, I don't think I can keep my faith. I couldn't pray to a God of punishment for whom cruelty made the most sense.

I read Psalm 22 this morning, because it contains the words that Jesus spoke from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s important for me to remember that in his greatest despair, Jesus was quoting scripture. Feeling forsaken by God is a part of faith’s struggle, one which sends us into the deepest and darkest realms of our being. For one such as Jesus whose whole life was dedicated to the promised blessings and meaning of being a peacemaker, to be so painfully tortured and cast out must have been a crushing blow to his spirit. In fact this despair of Jesus was so difficult for his followers to accept that the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” are not even included in the gospels of Luke or John (or Thomas).

Any faith I pursue must take into account the reality of evil in the world. There are truly bad people, those whom Scott Peck calls “the people of the lie” who do have to be restrained and removed from common society for the protection of the innocent. I cannot wish evil away.

In an insightful editorial in the New York Times just after the Penn State scandal broke, conservative columnist David Brooks warned against feeling too self-righteous and superior in judging those in power at Penn State who did not stop to act or intervene in this awful case of sexual abuse. He reminded us that the bystander effect, looking the other way when injustice is happening, is part of the human condition. Each of us is blind to evil and injustice in our own lives as well as the evil around and beside us every day.

Brooks believes that moral systems that acknowledge our weakness take into account our sinfulness. They remind us of the evil within ourselves, which is a good counter every now and then to what Brooks calls the current doctrines of inner wonderfulness. We, assured of our own goodness, blame others for what’s wrong, such as the culture of football, the Marines at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, or the big shots on Wall Street. (David Brooks, “Let’s All Feel Superior”, NY Times Nov. 14, 2011)

John Vannorsdall, my college chaplain at Gettysburg, changed the traditional common confession of sin from “Almighty and most merciful God, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep” to “We confess, O God, that we are linked by our common humanity to all the sin and death which scars the earth...”

As depressing as that statement may sound, I like it. My common link to “all the sin and death which scars the earth” reminds me of John Donne’s famous piece of poetry, “No man (or woman) is an island until itself... each is part of the main. So ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

We are called by God to recognize the evil in the world that also lives to some degree in each of us. My compassion must also recognize the place for justice. My belief in the goodness of creation and all people must also know that humankind has great capacity to do evil as well. And while I acknowledge the reality of evil, I also do not nor will I ever believe it overcomes good.

I come through my dark nights of the soul with a faith not in an endless upward curve of moral progress, although there are times I do at least wishfully proclaim this. I like to think we are better than we were when racial segregation was the law of the land, or witches were burned, or sixty thousand men of both

the North and the South were marched to their deaths at the battle of Gettysburg. No, the way I hold my faith is that I must accept the darkness as well as move to moments of light.

Those moments of light are called Kairos when time is not chronological (chronos) but shattered for a moment by holiness and love. Kairos moments break in with their light, and depart. But in some way the world is forever changed because of them. Kairos moments happen because we are born to bless and be blessed.

The blues in the night return, as is their nature. I know I will find myself stuck again in that place of no rest where it is always 3:00 a.m. in the dark night of my soul.

I don't talk about my blues very well. I probably let it out best with my trumpet. But having been through the blues in the night more than once, and having been blessed by the light of Kairos moments even more, something in me knows the light will always return, and when it does, something new will have been born in me, like a seed in the dark soil. My faith remains that light shatters night in the dayspring of grace.

Prayer –

Let us in our prayer, open ourselves to the darkness, trusting that the night too, even with the fright of 3:00 a.m. wakefulness is a gift of God's creation. Let us pray for the gift of the night in our lives.

And pray for times when it is winter, when nothing is growing in our souls, when the ground of our lives lies fallow, that we may trust that this too is good, and loved by God, and has its place.

And then let us rise in and from the darkness and pray again,

That all that is divided will merge

And compassion will be wedded to power,

And softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.

Let us pray, trust, and live this.

Let it be so.

Amen.