

Shades of Darkness, Bursts of Light!
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

In our Scripture lesson the Psalmist reminded us once again of God's good and gracious will for our lives and the manifold blessings that come with trust and faith. But there are times when those manifold blessings seem to have disappeared and momentarily we are plunged into darkness. In Luke, chapter 21, Jesus says:

⁸ "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."

¹⁰ Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

I know what Darkness is, do you?

After getting out of the Air Force in 1966, I went to work on the 5600 level of a phosphate mine in western Montana. One day the miners in the main tunnel, called a drift, hit an underground lake plunging me (and others) into ice cold water and total darkness. I wondered if I would ever see the light of day again, as I struggled to keep my chin above the rising water.

Slowly, I felt my way up dark mining shafts, called stopes, trying to find a way out, a way to the next level, only to be disappointed time and again. Hours passed as I sat alone in the cold and dark. My only hope was rescue.

So, I know what darkness is, what it is like to be lost and alone, cold and fearful, without hope and helpless! That's a shade of darkness I never want to know again but I've experienced another shade of darkness, even more dreadful!

The darkness of Sin—

When the darkness of sin closes in our eyes may still see the light of day but inside it is dark, ever so dark. Sin plunges us into a cold, dark of a mind shaft. Left unrepentant, sin brings a darkness that chills us to the bone, that leaves us lost and alone, fearful of God and separated from our family and friends. It's easy to find ourselves up to our chins in sin and there's no way out unless someone rescues us. Paul said, "For, there is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Perhaps you've been there in that darkness; maybe you're there this morning!

Sin is a shade of darkness like no other darkness known to man! I've known it and I suspect you have too and sin leads to such a great darkness inside.

Jesus puts it this way—

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad (clouded with unrepentant sin), your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6:22-24)

Sin fill us with such a great darkness but there even more darkness in our world!

The Darkness of Despair—

The darkness of despair is the kind of darkness that closes in on the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the sick or the imprisoned. These are ones that Jesus talked about in Matthew 25-

'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

I've seen that darkness many times, too many times, as a police officer, as a missionary, and as a parish pastor, as the director of disaster response. Despair causes people to believe that nobody cares; that there's no hope, that there's no possibility of rescue.

Despair is a darkness that invades the whole being with a cold, dark feeling filled with fear. Those who despair feel lost and alone, separated from God, unsure of the future. Hundreds of thousands of helpless and hurting people, scattered across our nation and around our world, are living in the darkness of despair even as we speak!

Everybody needs a little burst of light to overcome the darkness—

By now you've probably figured out that I survived the darkness of that mine disaster more than 40 years ago. Three men didn't survive but I was rescued when a burst of light broke through from up above and guided me to safety and to life. Light is such a good thing when you've been a prisoner of darkness and we've been called out of darkness into light according to Peter—

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

We have come out of the darkness into the marvelous light of his love. We are living in the light of Christ, delivered by a touch of mercy, receiving the gospel of hope and forgiveness.

God promised this marvelous light to all people—

In Jesus, who is the King of the Kingdom of Light, the darkness of sin and death and despair are shattered and the light of life is given to all mankind—

Again, Jesus said, "I have come into the world as a light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. (John 12:46)

And, on top of it all, Christ gives us the privilege of being light in this world of darkness caused by sin and despair.

We are privileged to be the of Light of the World—

It's true, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." (Matthew 5:14-15)

Christ's vision for his Church is one of selfless service to others rather than selfish service for our own benefit. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, so we come to the poor and needy to serve, not be served, and to give our lives in the service of Christ's gospel.

A touch of mercy, the gospel of hope and forgiveness, only takes a minute to deliver but its effect lasts an eternity. Mercy begets mercy! Christ's mercy toward us motivates us to be merciful to others. No one ever need suffer again in the cold and dark of despair and sin, lost and alone. There is hope!

Together, as the Church we are committed to doing what needs to be done at home and abroad; proclaiming the gospel, forgiving sins, feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, sheltering the strangers, clothing the naked, treating the sick, and visiting the prisoners (those held in darkness) all on Christ's behalf.

Through Christ and because of his gospel we are empowered to turn chaos into compassion, misery into mercy, darkness into light, and death into life. Yes, there is hope, hope in and through Christ! There is hope!

Father, all that we've done or ever will do is done because of your abiding love for us. In Christ, we reach out to touch the helpless and hurting just as you first touched us. Strengthen us for the work ahead; give us eyes of compassion and hearts of mercy as we serve you and our Savior in all things. Bless us with the power of your Holy Spirit that we may never tire of sharing the gospel and serving others. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen