

“The Dark Night of the Soul”

Date: October 18, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 84; Psalm 13

Occasion: Soul Keeping series

Theme: Suffering, God’s silence, dark night

One of the things that I absolutely love about the psalms is how gut-wrenching honest they are. They speak out of the depths of the human soul. In Psalm 84 which we read earlier, we heard these words: “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”

Talk about earnest desire. This soul has a deep hunger for God that just isn’t satisfied until it’s in the presence of God. What happens when God feels far away? What happens when God is MIA?

In Psalm 13, that I just read, we heard these words: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” This person pines for God and there is no answer. This person prays to God and there is no answer. This person feels God’s absence. Has that ever been you?

Over in Psalm 89:46 it says, “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?” For this person, God seems absent. It feels as though God has deserted him. He calls, he cries, he pleads, but God is silent. This is the experience of the dark night of the soul. Has that ever been you?

In the 16th chapter of John Ortberg’s book *Soul Keeping*, he begins with these words: “If you ask people who don’t believe in God why they don’t, the number one reason will be suffering. If you ask people who do believe in God when they grew most spiritually, the number one answer will be suffering.” (page 179)

When we suffer we wonder where God is: chronic pain; a life-threatening illness; the loss of a child; a divorce or the death of a spouse; a miscarriage; the sudden and unexpected loss of a job. You cry out to God, and where once you experienced consolation, now you only experience silence. God isn't talking.

Because the soul is the deepest expression of the person, the soul is the place of greatest pain. We do not speak of the dark night of the mind, or the will, or even the spirit. Only the soul. The dark night of the soul.

The phrase comes from a brilliant Carmelite monk named John who lived in Spain in the 16th century. He devoted his life to reforming the church, but his attempts were heavily criticized and he ended up in prison. It was there in confinement, with his dreams lost, that he wrote his most famous work: *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

It is an account of how God works to change us not just through joy and light, but through confusion, through disappointment, through loss. Because of his commitment in the midst of suffering, he became known as "St. John of the Cross."

The dark night of the soul, as he described it, is not simply the experience of suffering. It is suffering in what feels like the silence of God.

John of the Cross said that in the early days of a person's spiritual life, the soul often finds delight in devotional activities. We love to read the Bible; we hunger for worship; we long to pray. A person might believe this is a sign of spiritual maturity. In truth, it is really more a kind of honeymoon phase.

Quoting now from John of the Cross, “But there will come a time when God will bid them to grow deeper. He will remove the previous consolation of the soul in order to teach it virtue.”

What does it feel like? In the dark night our prayers feel like they reach no higher than the ceiling. In the dark night, the Bible sounds like empty words. In the dark night, words and songs and books that once spoke to my soul now leave me feeling cold.

John of the Cross was not talking about spiritual immaturity – when we haven’t even learned to love God’s word, or learned to praise God. Instead, he’s talking about what once nourished us spiritually, now tastes like sawdust in our mouths.

It’s also important to understand that the dark night of the soul is not the soul’s fault. Now, of course, it’s possible for you or me to grow cold toward God because we cling to our sin, or we prefer an idol in place of God, or because we simply become lazy. These are all real experiences that need to be addressed with wise counsel.

But they are not the dark night of the soul. The dark night is initiated by God. God has chosen, for God’s purposes, to remain silent, *not* to offer consolation, *not* to comfort the troubled soul. For the person of faith, this can feel like agony.

John of the Cross, writing from his prison cell, says that in the dark night, the soul is pained, but not hopeless. “God’s love is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for this reason God takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness...No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the dark night.” End of quote by John of the Cross

We have a hard time with the dark night. Our churches are practical places and we want to give people answers. We generally tell people to pray more, to give more time to service, and try harder to connect with God. And that only adds to the guilt. It doesn't work.

St. John says just the opposite. When the soul begins to enjoy the benefits of the spiritual life and then has them taken away, it becomes bitter and angry. Some people blame themselves, thinking it's something they've said or done, or neglected to do.

Some will try to become saints in a day, working overtime to feel God's presence again. They will make resolutions to be more spiritual. And oh the pain when it doesn't produce the results they hoped for.

Their problem is they lack the patience that waits for *whatever* God would give them. They lack the patience to wait for *when* God chooses to give. They must learn spiritual meekness, which will come about in the dark night.

So, what do we do in the dark night? Nothing. We do nothing. We wait. We remember that we are not God. We hold on. We ask for help. We do less. We resign from things. We rest more. We stop going to church. We ask somebody else to pray, because we can't.

And we let go of our need to hurry through it. You can't run in the dark. God is not absent and God will restore that sense of his presence. But we can't make it happen. We simply trust. We wait.

Modern churches have problems with this. We want to create a program. We want to find the right formula, the right step program, the right Bible study that will fix a person. But you don't fix the dark night of the soul. You wait. You wait for God.

How many of you know of Joni Eareckson Tada? She is a well-known Christian author and speaker who experienced a life-altering injury when she was a teenager. As a result of a diving accident she broke her back and became totally paralyzed. She has spent her entire adult life confined to a wheelchair.

When she learned that Dallas Willard had been diagnosed with cancer and was nearing the end of his life, she sent him these words, written by a 19th century writer named Frederick Faber. They obviously had brought comfort to her in her situation; now she felt they would be of benefit to Dallas. I quote:

“In the spiritual life God chooses to try our patience first of all by His slowness. He is slow: we are swift and precipitate. It is because we are but for a time, and He has been for eternity....There is something greatly overawing in the extreme slowness of God.

Let it overshadow our souls, but let it not disquiet them. We must wait for God, long, meekly, in the cold and the dark. Wait, and he will come. He never comes to those who do not wait. He does not go their road. When He comes, go with Him, but go slowly, fall a little behind; when he quickens His pace, be sure of it before you quicken yours. But when he slackens, slacken at once. And do not be slow only, but silent, very silent. For He is God.” End of quote.

It is likely that we will all experience the dark night, sometime. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. Wait. Be silent. Trust. Place your souls in God’s hands, even when you cannot feel His presence. Wait. Be silent. And trust. Amen.

Sermon borrows heavily from John Ortberg’s book *Soul Keeping*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014. pp. 179-188.