

“Light in a Sea of Darkness”

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Texts: Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4: 12-23

On Tuesday, I listened to the baccalaureate speech given by Dr. Howard Thurman at Spelman College, Atlanta in 1980. It made me think of what I was doing in 1980. It was a tough time: Parents were divorcing, there were several bullies at school, my older sister would soon leave for college and that would leave a big hole for me. At the same time, these students at Spelman were listening to Dr. Thurman talk about the genuine in ourselves and how we find it, share it, and find it with others. I can give you the reference if you’re interested, but needless to say, it was a powerful speech. The other thing I was in 1980 was a kid, and as a kid I had a much harder time hiding who I was from those around me. It took growing into adulthood before I could learn fully how to put up the walls, play the game, fit in and be “popular.” Now, later in life, I’m wanting to get back to some of those things I did well as a kid, even if that means I’m not quite as popular as I’ve grown accustomed to. There are many reasons for this, but most of all it is the encounter with this man from Nazareth we call Jesus. Speaking of genuine, he is the real deal. Well-meaning people since his day have done a lot of disservice to his genuineness, but if you read the scripture, I think you’ll see what I’ve come to see, that Jesus was more than just a friend, a confidant, a spiritual leader—a nice guy—Jesus was also radical and from the moment his ministry began he personified light in the midst of darkness. And in his call, he called on us to do the same.

In the reading from Isaiah this morning, the prophet relates to us the familiar words we hear at Christmas about light bursting into the darkness. People argue about whether he is talking about Jesus or not, but needless to say there are many places in the world where light is called upon to break up the darkness. In our world, in our nation, and for many of us, even in our own souls. Much of our lives feel bleak and we seek and search for our genuine selves, but as importantly, we seek the genuine in the other. And dear God, it is hard to find. We've erected so many walls between one another, and we've found so many ways to dodge who we really are to be someone we have constructed.

Today, in our scripture from Matthew, Jesus begins his ministry. As you know from a couple of weeks ago, Jesus' ministry really began at the point of his baptism. And once it began, he never looked back. Mark's Gospel doesn't begin with the baptism, but it does begin with Jesus saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." To the people of his day, the message was electrifying. Jesus wasn't just saying that this was the good news of the day. Instead, he was saying that when the kingdom of God approaches us, we cannot help but see light in the darkness and begin the work to become our true selves. Jesus calls that repentance. It's another word we in the Christian lexicon that Christians have bastardized.

We've turned it into this wacky notion of cleansing ourselves of ourselves. We've made it that we are so depraved, so completely awful, that God is disgusted by us. Therefore, we need to repent of all our bad ways, then God will love us, the birds will sing, and problems will go away. We don't really change. We just keep going through the motions of saying the magic formula in the hopes that God will one day not find us disgusting. And

maybe if God felt that way we might not be so disgusted with ourselves. Unicorns will dance in the street, and our work will be finished.

Or we think that repentance is all about entering God's kingdom when we die. If we're good (and again, say the magic formula) then we will live happily ever after in eternity. We inappropriately misuse other scriptures to bolster that argument, including a misreading of what Jesus meant when he told us to deny ourselves. Taken to its logical conclusion, we then declare that it's okay that our lives are miserable and this world can be miserable, because someday in the by and by we'll be rescued from in all in Christianity's great escape plan.

Jesus didn't feel that way. In fact, not only did he begin his ministry that the kingdom was at hand, but he also taught us to pray every week that this kingdom would come so that earth would be as it is in heaven. Jesus spoke of "God's mercy, God's deliverance, especially for those mistreated in this age before God's intervention. (David Gushee, *The Moral Teachings of Jesus: Radical Instruction in the Will of God*, p5). New Testament scholar David Garland writes: "The future created by God is no longer a flickering hope...it has become available in the present." Now! The kingdom is present NOW!

But it doesn't quite look like we'd imagined. We don't see streets paved with gold, and we don't see a place where suffering and death will be no more. That's true. Part of it is because we refuse to see, we refuse to act to make that reality real. We refuse to do what St. Francis told us...find what is ours to do and do it! We wait for God to act, and we sit and mope that world is a mess.

You see, for the followers of Jesus, “the kingdom is at hand...turn around!” was not to tell us that all was done and we are finished. Instead, it was what one author called, “their behavioral marching orders” It requires co-participation on the part of humanity, and it requires a long-time horizon. God’s divine activity is not found in any nation, in any world policy, or in earthly politics. But it also is not found by waiting around hoping it materializes. We start with this grand story of a kingdom we’ve never experienced, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to bring it to reality in co-operation with the almighty.

Right alongside these marching orders comes Jesus’ command that we repent. The Greek *metanoia* actually simply means to “turn around” and to “change.” “The first word that comes out of Jesus’ mouth is *change* – be willing to change (Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, February 20, 2023).” We are perfectly willing for others to change, but for ourselves, we often just keep doing the same things the same way hoping that something different happens. No wonder we feel insane much of the time.

So, what am I calling on for us to change? Do we need new programs? New ideas? New songs? Worship facing backwards. Handstands? Maybe. Probably not. In fact, if you’ve been following along, I’m wanting us to change back into who we genuinely are. I believe that is one of the hardest things any of us can do. We are so practiced at the walls, the performances, the “going along to get along” that we really aren’t all that good at being ourselves—truly ourselves. Mostly because of all the noise that is around us. Thurman spoke about noise in his address at Spelman, but that 1980, which was, by comparison, a lot quieter than today. But the problem was and is the same.

Many of us don't mind being alone, but that doesn't mean we like being with ourselves. We play hide-and-seek with our true selves, all the while getting exhausted from the false selves we create. To do this, we have to cut out the noise for a bit, sit with ourselves, and listen to the genuine that is in each one of us. Thurman reminds us that there has never been, nor will there ever be, another you that is just like you.

Another author puts it this way (Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, March 10, 2024), “What we discover in the New Testament, especially in Matthew’s Gospel, is that the Reign of God is a new world order, a new age, a promised hope begun in the teaching and ministry of Jesus—and continued in us. I think of the Reign of God as the *Really Real*. That experience of the Really Real—is the heart of Jesus’ teaching. It’s Reality with a capital R, the very bottom line, the pattern-that-connects. It’s the goal of all true religion, the experience of the Absolute, the Eternal, what is.”

Want to find light in the world’s darkness? Begin by looking within. Only when we begin to see our light, our genuine purpose in this world, our genuine gifts to this world that we can begin to see those in others. Then we will have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the knowledge to comprehend God at work in the world in and through us. I know that from many perspectives’ things look bleak in our world. But the truth is that light longs to break in, but we are so convinced it’s not present we shut it out.

Maybe it’s time we cut it out. Genuinely so. The kingdom of God is at hand! Let us participate in it.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.