

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Psalm 130

Amtrak's Coast Starlight train was filled with excited passengers, craning their necks to enjoy the Oregon scenery as the train rolled through green forests. A shining lake gleamed through the trees, and cheerful conversation filled the air.

Suddenly, the light, airy feeling was gone, like a candle blown out in a draft as they entered a tunnel. Expecting the sun to reappear quickly, Ellen Bergh, author of "What Lies Ahead?" was uncomfortable as it became even darker.

The happy sounds were a thing of the past. Everyone sat in awe of the inky blackness. The longer they traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was to remain calm without any visual cues to reassure them. Even the movement of the train seemed to fall away into pitch darkness. When they came out of the tunnel, laughter and relief filled the compartment.

"My life in Christ is like that unforgettable train ride," Ellen reflects. "Events may plunge me into darkness where I have no clues to sense the Lord's presence. Yet I can trust God is with me even when I can't see what lies ahead."

Everyone experiences times of emotional darkness, otherwise known as the dark nights of the soul. Loss, illness, broken relationships, unwanted change, tragedy, even listening to the news can throw one into a pit filled with feelings of intense pain and heavy sadness. For some people, chemical imbalances cause depression. Lest we think otherwise, even Christians fall victim to the darkness. This is not a sign of failure as a Christian, we're human too.

Henri Nouwen experienced what seems to have been a Dark Night of the Soul from December of 1987 to June of 1988. The famous Catholic priest, seminary professor, and author had helped millions of people grow into a more intimate relationship with God and yet he found himself in a period of "extreme anguish." He felt "completely abandoned" by God. He wondered, Is God real or just a product of my imagination?

In his book "The Inner Voice of Love," Nouwen describes his spiritual crisis: "Everything came crashing down — my self-esteem, my energy to live and work, my sense of being loved, my hope for healing, my trust in God—everything. Here I was, a writer about the spiritual life, known as someone who loves God and gives hope to people, flat on the ground and in total darkness.

What had happened? I had come face to face with my own nothingness. It was as if all that had given my life meaning was pulled away and I could see nothing in front of me but a bottomless abyss." Many of us can relate to what Henri felt.

The Author of Psalm 130 knew times of darkness too. He reveals to us in his hymn that in the depths of his despair, he cried out to God, calling upon God to listen to him as he shares his pain. With this request, he reminds us that although the darkness makes us feel isolated and distant from God, this is precisely when we need God the most, and God is always there for us.

If the Psalmist did not believe this, then why would he call out to God in the first place. As people who believe that God is our source of being and ruler of our lives, why wouldn't we turn to God first in our times of darkness. It is God's desire that we don't struggle through our gloom alone...even though struggle, we must.

As one who has known the darkness, I have come through to the other side. Dealing with haunting memories of abuse, sifting through questions of why, and fighting feelings of low self-worth, was not an easy journey; but it was at the deepest darkest moment when I was closest to God who walked with me through the struggle. I can honestly say that I **thank God for the**

struggle because without it, I would still be wandering in all of those painful feelings I mentioned a few moments ago. As the Psalmist said, we cry out, knowing that God will help us.

This hymn also reminds us that the darkness we experience can be brought on by our own sin. The Psalmist recognized and admitted his sinful nature, yet he knew that God did not keep a record of his sin, nor does God keep a record of our sin. God forgives our sin. God does not withhold his presence and help from us because of our sin. God's love for us is beyond anything we could possibly imagine. An everlasting sign of God's love is his only Son, Jesus, who lived, died for our sin, and rose again, so we could be set free from our sin and be one with God.

Unfortunately, we may keep a record of our sins leading us to feel low self-esteem or self-pity and causing us to think we're unworthy of God's care. We box ourselves in a mindset that we deserve our plight. We may feel we need to earn God's help to get out of our darkness. But the psalmist tells us there's no way for us to rise out of the pit of darkness when we do not accept God's forgiveness. His forgiveness is there for us, freely given if we will receive it.

At the end of this hymn, the Psalmist sums up his message by using two key words, waiting and hope. In the Hebrew, which this text was originally written, the words for wait and hope, mean the same thing. This means then that the Psalmist looks forward, not into the past, but forward in eager longing and expectation for what God will do, confident that God's promises are reliable and that their newness will create great good and well-being.

You see, this is not a poem or hymn of groveling guilt, but it is one of liberated expectation. The words speak of active and eager anticipation that God will do something new as he walks us beyond the darkness we may experience. A person who genuinely offers this prayer, waits for God's future plan for him/her and welcomes it with eagerness.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when you find yourself in emotional and spiritual darkness, cry out to God, knowing that nothing can separate you from God's love and desire to help, not even sin, then wait and watch, with hope and eagerness, for the freedom in life that God will lead you to, a life with dignity and well-being. It is God's plan for you. Amen.