

IN THE DARK

A little boy was afraid of the dark.

One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom.

The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mom, I don't want to go out there. It's dark."

The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained.

"God is out there. God will look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure God's out there?"

"Yes, I'm sure. God is everywhere, and God is always ready to help you when you need him," she said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little.

Peering out into the darkness, he called,

"God? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"

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I wonder if the broom was handed to him?

I wonder, when in the dark, what is our perception of God?

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We are in the season of Lent, and Lent is a prompt for us to do some personal introspection and searching. Let's hope we don't survive unscathed. We don't want to squander this opportunity.

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Today's theme is written in black ink; it is about being in the dark.

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In the Genesis text, which we did not read, Abram goes into a dark place.

He was overwhelmed, and the story states that "a terrifying darkness fell upon" him. Even Abram experienced a dark place.

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From the Luke passage, we learn that Jesus was heading towards Jerusalem, but before he arrives, he was warned and reminded about the darkness shrouding the city. This darkness casts a shadow over Jesus, and the Luke text ends with Jesus' lament.

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Jesus is warned by "some Pharisees" not to enter Jerusalem.

Usually, the Pharisees are presented as the antagonists, which is a bit unfair. Like any other group of people, the Pharisees were a mixture of various kinds of individuals.

*** It's the malefactors that get all the press!*

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Jesus is told that Herod wants to kill him.

Upon hearing the warning, Jesus showed his human side, and snaps back with a biting retort, calling Herod a **Fox**.

A Fox is a predator that sneaks around in the dark, snatching and killing the weak.

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Jesus explained to the Pharisees that he had work to do, regardless of what Herod's plans are. Also, Jesus said that he would go to Jerusalem when the time is right, even though the "Fox" prowls in the dark.

The lament reveals Jesus' sorrow and pain for the people who live as if they have and know it all.
Here is the lament:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it" They do not want to be confronted. They do not want to transform.

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Were the children--the innocent in the darkness Not willing... or were the conditions / the culture preventing it?

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Nevertheless,... we can feel Jesus' pain.... pain that cries from and for dark places.

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Darkness is a metaphor, as is Fox and Hen.

Darkness is a place / a condition of deep despair, pain and aloneness.

There are many reasons darkness comes upon a person, and sadly, some of those reasons are stigmatized.

People with depression often find themselves in a dark, lonely place.

Anxiety casts a huge, heavy shadow, and it can be overwhelming.

Some darkening conditions are temporary, such as bad concussion.

Others, be it Post Traumatic Stress disorder, phobias and so on, can go on endlessly. And, often these are times of aloneness.

And a "Secret" darkness is terribly bleak indeed.

A private, personal darkness is truly lonely because the secret means no one knows--no one knows the burden.

And,... the secret darkness also means that those suffering in the dark can not see / do not realize how many others suffer, too.

To be sure, most of us, if not all of us.....have our dark, lonely places.

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Some of the strongest, bravest people in the world are those suffering with depression and anxiety.

Each day is a battle .

Moreover, to make matters worse, there is additional pressure to put on a front / to act as if all is okay--to live a painful lie.

It is a pressure we put on each other, and that demand can be lethal.

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Two weeks ago, my niece (my brother's middle daughter) attempted suicide.

A few days after she was released from the hospital, she was embarrassed and angry.

Angry because her friends sent their sympathy. They were Friends who, she cogently stated, only wanted to be with her if she was happy and "Up". They wanted no part of her darkness, and her

darkness became too lonely and heavy to bear on her own. They were not friends. They were parasites.

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I wish I could say church is an open and honest place. A place where facades are not needed. We can pray for others, but do we ever openly share and petition prayers for our own selves in the darkness?

A honest church must be a sanctuary for those in brokenness and darkness. We need a safe place to be real and open, and I truly hope we will be that. I hope and pray we will be church where weakness, struggles and pain are graciously received.....and shared.

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I wonder,.... ..maybe it is that we don't know how to respond or what to say. ??

Here are some example of how to regard and talk with each other:

- You are worth more than your darkness.
- You are not alone
- You matter
- I'm proud of you.
- Your feelings are always valid.
- It's not your fault
- You are Not your anxiety or depression.
- We'll get through this together.
- There's nothing wrong asking for help.

Those are heartfelt, powerful words that can help bring light to the darkness.

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In the Philippians passage, Paul was in a dark place when he wrote this letter. He was in prison, and the churches he helped nurture were struggling, especially in Philippi.

At face value, Paul comes across as arrogant and Pollyanna, but read deeper,.....and consider his darkness.

I think Paul was writing to himself, too. He was openly sharing.

Listen again to some of his words.

Vs. 20: Our citizenship is in heaven can mean--You are worth more than your darkness..., and you are not your anxiety or depression. You are recognized to be more than that.

Vs. 21: Paul said, "Our humiliation" which is the same as "you are not alone. And, chapter 4:5 states, "God is near."

You matter -- God cares enough to "guard your hearts and minds" vs 7, chapter 4.

Paul often wrote about his love and praise for the church. He was saying, "I'm proud of you."

When Paul noted the persecution and dark forces, he's stressing, that the darkness is Not Your fault ... and Your feelings Are valid.

You're not to blame.

Verse 16: "We'll hold fast together", in other words, "We'll get through this together.

And, "There's nothing wrong asking for help" is affirmed in chapter 4 where Paul said to share and make known your requests --ask for help.

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Yes, Paul was trying to put on a strong face, but I think he was preaching to himself, too. He needed to hear those words as much as anyone else. He was suffering with them.

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Still,..... how does this work? How will the darkness end, and will God simply just reach out and hand us a broom?

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Recall Jesus' metaphor.
Jesus labelled Herod a Fox?
And, what did he compare himself to?????

Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. ???
Where is the biblical precedent for that?

What about the mighty eagle of Exodus, or Hosea's stealthy leopard? What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar?

Compared to any of those, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence.

But, a **hen** is what Jesus chose, which -- if you think about it --is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom.

He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first.

So, of course he chose a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: **you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.**

Jesus won't be king of the jungle in this or any other story.

What he will be is a mother hen, who is between the chicks and those who intend to do them harm.

However, I've see some pretty tough chickens. White leghorns can be quite bold, and even Rhode Island Red and Bantam Hens are fiercely protective of their young.

Yet, compared to a fox? ??????

In the worst case scenario,.....after an intense mêlée, the weary fox leaves with the hen, and that is all.

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Imagine the situation of young chickens under the hen's wings.  
The wings are spread out, and all is dark under the wings.

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We are the young, vulnerable chickens "together" in the dark, under the protective wings.

It is very dark, but we are NOT alone, and it is in that awareness that light comes to the darkness.
There's Darkness and light--both.

Together,... we are in this together,... together under the wings of the divine there is light. There is light
in the darkness.

And, by the grace of God,.....we are to also become the wings of protection for each other.

Together, with God, the darkness will not overwhelm you and me.