

Sermon for October 11, 2009

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Mammoth Cave is a hole in the ground about two hours from Louisville, Kentucky. It's an elementary/middle school child's dream since a field trip to see the eighth wonder of the world means no school for an entire day. A variety of tours are available, including expeditions for serious spelunkers as well as easy walks through readily accessible portions of the system. You can squeeze through "Fat Man's Misery" and duck under stalactites. You can see the place where salt peter was mined during the civil war, ancient hollowed logs still connected forming a short stretch of pipeline that goes nowhere. On one of the tours you can descend deeper into the cave and see the vestiges of the river that eroded and formed the great system of caverns. Sometimes you can see the fish that have no eyes, an evolutionary mutation and wonder occasioned by the unrelenting darkness.

One of my favorite and momentarily frightening experiences in Mammoth Cave took place during a historical tour. A guide took a few moments to demonstrate how early cave tours were conducted. Our small group of tourists was instructed to turn off anything that produced light. We were told to cover our wristwatches since many models have luminescent hands. At the guide's command the electric lights were temporarily shut off and we were plunged into darkness. This is not the quiet darkness of a starless night. It's not even the inky darkness that occurs when you enter a room late in the evening and every window is covered. I could not see the person next to me; I could not see my hand in front of my face. I couldn't see anything; my eyes were useless. Though the lights were off for only a few seconds it seemed like a far longer time. I could sense restlessness within the group; a growing sense of panic was developing as the darkness squeezed us tightly and made it hard to breathe. The guide struck a match, and with that tiny spark the darkness was dispelled. A torch was lit, and in a few moments the lights were turned on, and the darkness was gone, though it continued to lurk in the farther recesses of the cave.

Have you ever been plunged in darkness? Has darkness every covered you?

We're about to enter into a time of the year in which our portion of the world in blanketed in darkness for greater durations of time. The nights are already becoming longer. The sun seems to go to bed far earlier now than it did just a few weeks ago, and seems more reluctant to get up in the morning. This annual cycle of increasing darkness raises anxiety and depression in some people. I suspect this seasonal change has a transforming effect upon us all. Folks most sensitive to this change are said to suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD, a malaise involving the deprivation of light.

At least that's what doctors and researchers believe. Diminished light increases agitation, anxiety and depression. Sometimes patients in hospitals and nursing homes become more ill at ease and more difficult to manage as darkness falls. Sundown Syndrome likely affects more folks than the elderly or the incapacitated. I suspect it affects most of us in some way.

Have you ever been plunged in darkness? Has darkness ever covered you?

Jerry Harvey wrote about a kind of darkness that covers all of us. The technical term is anaclitic depression. It's a darkness we plunge into whenever we lose something or someone important to us. It doesn't matter if others think the loss insignificant; if the one who experiences the loss believes it significant then he or she experiences anaclitic depression. It could be the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or the steady decline of one's portfolio. It could be the loss of a hope or the denial of a dream. It could be the discovery one was wrong when being right mattered a great deal. It makes one blue, or puts one in a blue mood, which is never a bright blue but a far darker shade. Blue can be so dark it appears to be black.

Have you ever been plunged in darkness? Has darkness ever covered you?

If anyone could make a case for depression Job certainly could. Read the first portion of the book that bears his name and one discovers Job is a righteous man, which means he has done what is right in the sight of God. He's not perfect, but he is a good man whose goodness is greater than most. Satan believes Job is good because God is good to Job; God believes Job is good because Job is good. In order to find out who is right about Job God allows Satan to do most anything he wants to do to Job except take his life. Within a few chapters Job's children die, his livestock are killed, his wealth evaporates, and his health is destroyed. Friends will come to question what Job has done to deserve this, which makes them agents of darkness. Job is in Mammoth Cave and they just turned out the lights.

Job lost something else, though it isn't as tangible but just as real as some of his other losses. Job lost the theological underpinnings of his life. Job believed a person receives from God what a person deserves. Since Job had been a good man, he would receive blessings from God. Had Job been an evil, unrighteous person he might have deserved boils and the death of his children; but not as a righteous man. Job's wife and Job's friends continue to offer the standard theological explanation for his suffering and encourage Job to confess his wrong-doing so he can get better. Or go ahead and curse God and put his suffering to an end.

Job can't find God to file a complaint. That's what our passage for today declares. Job is frustrated because he thinks he could present his case for righteousness and be acquitted. He wants to argue with God about the way he has been unfairly treated. He feels certain God would declare him not guilty. But God is nowhere to be found. Forward, backward, right or left – wherever Job goes God isn't there. "If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

Job speaks these words because he has vanished in the darkness; thick darkness has covered his face. He wasn't voicing a request; he was

describing his experience. A profound depression has filled and emptied him. Who wouldn't be depressed? His children are gone; his life is gone; his God is gone.

"My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" I think Job said those words long before the psalmist wrote them, and long before Jesus spoke them from the cross. Jesus' story is of a righteous man who suffers. Jesus was a man of sorrows who knew firsthand what it was like to lose what was important to him. In his time of need friends deserted him, denied him and betrayed him. As he breathed his last upon the cross the world was plunged into darkness. His body was placed in a tomb, a stone rolled across the opening; in death he was covered with grace clothes and darkness.

Darkness had often accompanied the one who was called the light of life. Jesus constantly dealt with unbelief which is a form of darkness that takes hold of us when we turn loose of what we hold dear. Mary and Martha accosted Jesus when their brother Lazarus died. They had plunged into their own darkness, and they lashed out at whoever and whatever was nearby. They told Jesus of their profound disappointment he had not come to aid his dying friend. Jesus wept as he stood near the dark place where Lazarus' body was placed. At his command the darkness became light as his friend emerged from the tomb. Those who refused to believe Jesus saw this as a particularly dark time and began to consider how they might take Jesus' life. From that point onward darkness always was close at hand, always nipping at his heels.

In the night, in the midst of darkness, Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray. His friends who went with him could not stay awake and support him which must have made the night darker. He prayed the darkness would end, that the cup might be taken from him, though he was determined to do whatever he needed to do. There is no record of an audible voice encouraging Jesus; there's no divine pronouncement like the ones that occurred when we has baptized or transfigured: This is my son; with him I am well-pleased. Perhaps like Job whichever way he turned God wasn't

there. Throughout the agony that led to the crucifixion, and on Golgotha itself, perhaps Jesus thought God absent. Perhaps darkness covered Jesus' face before it covered the face of the earth. Yet his cry of dereliction is not his final word. Forsakenness somehow becomes faith. "Into your hands I commit my spirit." From the darkness comes a declaration of trust and hope.

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." The book of Hebrews also reminds us before God no creature is hidden; all of us are revealed for who we are, for what we are. God knows our very being, and God knows at the core of our being sometimes there is a darkness that covers us. Sometimes there is a darkness in which we lose ourselves.

There is an angry mood in our nation. I think it comes from all the losses we have incurred. It's the consequence of anaclitic depression on a national scale. We've seen wealth erode, and even though we know our treasure is in heaven, our portfolio is here on earth. We've seen good men and women perish in war. We have come to realize what we already knew: we are not immune or insulated from tragedy. We've discovered power and might do not necessarily translate into victory or achievement. We've lost jobs, lost friends, lost those we love. We've lost confidence in the markets, and lost confidence in the system. We lost money we didn't have buying things we didn't need. We've lost confidence legislators can or will work together. Each loss is a source of depression, and each depression sometimes makes us more withdrawn and sometimes makes us angrier.

Faith is our hope, I believe, and those who have lost faith suffer another depression. "Let there be light," God spoke at creation, and the darkness was dispelled. Darkness would return, and light would come once more. Evening and morning formed the first day and every day thereafter, a cycle of darkness and light, an illustration of depression and faith. John's gospel tells us Jesus is the light of life, and darkness cannot extinguish the light. Though I know that truth it is sometimes overcome by other truths that

plunge me for a while in darkness. Though the world was plunged in darkness when Jesus died, the rising sun discovered and accompanied the risen Lord as the world discovered light triumphed over darkness once more.

I don't think depression is cured. I think our losses are real and to deny them is an even deeper dive into darkness. I think one lives with darkness trusting that greater than the darkness is the light of God's grace and love. Into your hands I commit my spirit is a word from the cross and a word for each day. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to boldly approach the throne of grace because Jesus has paved the way. We follow the light of life in the midst of our darkness, trusting, hoping and believing in the goodness and grace of God. And when we cannot see the light we walk as boldly as we can, assured a glimmer of light will be seen once more.

Years ago my family became friends with W J Davis. He was the Minister of Music at our home church. W J had a mellifluous baritone voice and a gracious spirit. He was a handsome man, robust and strong. W J Accepted the call to another church and moved from our area but our families remained in contact. In recognition of his musical ability W J was selected for a wonderful singing group called *The Centurymen*, an auditioned group of one hundred of the finest Ministers of Music in the Southern Baptist Convention. Then darkness covered W J's family. One of his young sons was struck with cancer and died. Not long after his son's death W J discovered he had cancer involving the lymph nodes in his throat. His handsome countenance was disfigured by surgeries that took half of his neck and spared his life. His strong and beautiful voice was never the same. Yet as long as he was able, long after his voice had lost its beauty and strength, W J stood and sang with *The Centurymen*. He sang because he could. He sang because the light is greater than the darkness. He sang one note at a time, putting one foot of faith in front of the other boldly walking in the darkness.

Sometimes that's all one can do. Sometimes that's all I can do. God give us courage and strength to put one foot in front of the other and walk boldly in the darkness.