

May 4, 2014

The book of Acts, because of its similar language, structure and theological discourse, is thought to be written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. This book is to be read as a narrative that is a continuation of the Old Testament-Luke narrative. As such, the function of book of Acts is, as the preface states, told to strengthen faith. I should be read, therefore, to inform, reinforce and add credibility to one's faith, or to create and instill faith where faith does not yet exist. The reading this morning from Acts is a response to one of Peter's sermons. Peter's preaching in Chapter verses 14 – 36 has struck a responsive chord and has turned to listening crowd into willing inquirers. Peter's call to repentance and promise of sins forgiven echo the call of John the Baptist and fulfills the promise of the risen Jesus.

Act 2: 14a, 36 – 41

¹⁴That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: ³⁶"All Israel, then, know this: There's no longer room for doubt—God made him Master and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross."

³⁷Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?"

³⁸Peter said, "Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites."

⁴⁰He went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, "Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!"

⁴¹That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. ⁴²They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

The story of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus is unique to the Gospel of Luke. It is thought that this particular story might have been shaped with Christian worship in mind, as it takes place on a Sunday, contains scripture and sacrament. One of the disciples remains nameless and Cleopas, although named, shows up nowhere else in the scriptures. This then becomes a story of the Christian church encountering the risen Christ in the world. The disciples summarize Luke's Gospel in telling what had happened, but are kept from recognizing Christ until their eyes are opened to the real meaning of the scriptures.

Luke 24: 13-35

¹³That same day two of them were walking to the village Emmaus, about seven miles out of Jerusalem. ¹⁴They were deep in conversation, going over all these things that had happened. ¹⁵In the middle of their talk and questions, Jesus came up and walked along with them. ¹⁶But they were not able to recognize who he was.

¹⁷He asked, “What’s this you’re discussing so intently as you walk along?” They just stood there, long-faced, like they had lost their best friend. ¹⁸Then one of them, his name was Cleopas, said, “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard what’s happened during the last few days?” ¹⁹He said, “What has happened?” They said, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene. He was a man of God, a prophet, dynamic in work and word, blessed by both God and all the people. ²⁰Then our high priests and leaders betrayed him, got him sentenced to death, and crucified him. ²¹And we had our hopes up that he was the One, the One about to deliver Israel. And it is now the third day since it happened. ²²But now some of our women have completely confused us. Early this morning they were at the tomb ²³and couldn’t find his body. They came back with the story that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. ²⁴Some of our friends went off to the tomb to check and found it empty just as the women said, but they didn’t see Jesus.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can’t you simply believe all that the prophets said? ²⁶Don’t you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him. ²⁸They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. He acted as if he were going on ²⁹but they pressed him: “Stay and have supper with us. It’s nearly evening; the day is done.” So he went in with them. ³⁰And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. ³¹At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared. ³²Back and forth they talked. “Didn’t we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?” ³³They didn’t waste a minute. They were up and on their way back to Jerusalem. They found the Eleven and their friends gathered together, ³⁴talking away: “It’s really happened! The Master has been raised up—Simon saw him!” ³⁵Then the two went over everything that happened on the road and how they recognized him when he broke the bread.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Meditation – “Where is God in the world?”

I remember one time when I was young we were at friends of my parents one Sunday for dinner. There were probably 3 or 4 families that had been invited over for dinner that evening, so there was a whole bunch of kids around. Well we kids decided that we would go down in the basement, which had very tiny windows and play a game of hide and seek, in the dark. I also remember many a summer evening in Pinawa where we would wait until it got dark and play hide and seek. Although we would do our best to scare each other, we also had a whole lot of fun. At the last youth group event, we had a games night at the church and inevitably someone asked if they could play a game of hide and seek and the entire church was filled with darkness and the hooting and hollering of young people scaring each other and sometimes, scaring themselves.

This week we find ourselves still in the season of Easter. We journeyed together through Lent and during that time we spent a whole lot of time talking about light. We even symbolized this by opening a blind every service, as a way to bring in more light and more color because we were looking at a theology of the cross based in love, bathed in light, not a theology of darkness.

That is where I wanted to go today, to a place of darkness. I know that sounds strange but it is not as negative as it first sounds.

The reading from Luke this morning tells a story that is only found in this one Gospel and it is the story of two disciples walking home to Emmaus when they encounter a stranger and they relate to this stranger all that has happened in Jerusalem. I can only imagine these two walking home, probably to a place of safety, because when things don't work out quite like we planned how many of us want to go home? So, there they are walking down the road trying to figure out what happened and what it all means for them. We mustn't forget, and I have spoken on it before, that many expected Jesus was going to come and deliver the people from the yoke of living under foreign rule and yet here it is, Jesus has been crucified. If we think about it the disciples had left everything they had known, they had left their lives, to follow Jesus and now Jesus was gone and they struggle to make sense out of their world that seems to have been turned upside down.

In this reading we find 5 simple words that I think speak volumes to us today. Those words are "we had our hopes up." These words speak of the disappointment and confusion that the disciples must have felt. These words speak of a future unfulfilled, they speak of dreams that will never be realized and David Lose, who is the Marbury E. Anderson Biblical Preaching Chair at Luther Seminary in St. Paul Minnesota, calls these words the "most heartbreaking and realistic in scripture." How many times in our own lives have we used those or similar words? How many times had we hoped for things that never materialized or never happened? These are words that convey sadness, disappointment and can bring us to a place of darkness. We sometimes have the tendency to gloss over these places of darkness, those places of disappointment in life. David Lose puts it in this way, "I love those heartbreaking words not because I enjoy wallowing in dark or sentimental emotions, but because they ring true to me. They are not the only truth, of course; there is much in this life that is beautiful, daring, confident, inspiring, and more, all of which deserves our gratitude. But there is also disappointment, heartbreak, and failure." Unlike the youth here who embrace the fun of playing in the darkness, we, in today's world, like to not think about those dark places of disappointment, of loss, of fear.

As I was planning this service on Tuesday I was thinking about those words and as I was deep in thought my son came in with the mail and he handed me this week's Time magazine with the cover story about Barbara Brown Taylor called, "Finding God in the Dark."

Since the beginning of scripture when in the creation story God separates darkness from light and it was good, we have quite often associated light with the divine and darkness with bad things, those things we don't want or need in our lives. Barbara Brown Taylor states in the Time article, "If we turn away from darkness on principle," she asks, "doing everything we can to avoid it because there is simply no telling what it contains, isn't there a chance we are running away from God?"

During our Lenten journey we talked about incarnation and how that informs us that God is with us through everything we experience in life, including those dark places.

Yet, we do our best to move out of those places of uncertainty, of great disappointment, or darkness as quickly as possible and yet if we look at it some of our most important interactions with the divine, with God, they have happened in the dark. The covenant with Abraham occurred at night as God promised Abraham more descendants than the stars, God met Moses in the dark night on Mount Sinai, Jesus was born under the light of star at night, and the resurrection occurred in the dark of the tomb. As Barbara Brown Taylor states, "God and darkness have been friends for a long time, it's just one nighttime story after another-amazing."

We even like our images of God to be images of light. The cover story in the April United Church Observer is "The Many Faces of Jesus," and the most popular image of Christ is Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*. It is an image that I am sure most of us have seen, it shows a Jesus with long dirty blond tresses, bathed in light and according to the article has been copied over 500 million times. Timothy Schmalz, an artist based in St. Jacob's, Ontario, in the Observer article talks about what happened when he took Jesus off the stereotypical grid. What came of this was Schmalz's sculpture, *Jesus the Homeless*, which depicts Jesus sleeping under a blanket on a park bench. This sculpture was to be installed in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and then at St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto, but both the Archdioceses of New York and Toronto stepped in and prevented the sculpture from being installed. As Schmalz said, "It was such a strange time. For six months, homeless Jesus didn't have a home," he says. The rub? "People were not used to seeing Jesus represented this way. If you google images of Jesus, there is basically one representation that has spanned hundreds of years." The Homeless Jesus is a darker representation of Jesus and like life we are not comfortable in those dark places. Pope Francis was so moved by this sculpture is now being installed on the street leading in the Vatican.

If we truly believe in what Lent tells us, if we truly believe that God journeys with us then in those dark times in our lives, God is there. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the blessings of those dark places like this, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light." Taylor believes that a walk in the dark can lead to wisdom, deliver us from our fear and bring us closer to God.

Those two who were journeying on that road to Emmaus were journeying in a place of darkness, they were journeying in a place of unfulfilled hopes and dreams and in the midst of that darkness, they truly found God, Jesus was with them. In the anthem that Laura picked for this morning it talks about being in a place of darkness, yet it talks about coming into that darkness and that we are not to be afraid. We are not be be afraid because God is with us in the midst of darkness. We are called as people of God to live into our fully human lives, to live in the glory of the light but to also live into those dark places, those places we fear and to know God is with us there and we will find God in those places. AMEN