

A Sermon by Crystal Hardin
The Twenty Third Sunday After Pentecost (B)
Sunday, October 28, 2018

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 | Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)
Hebrews 7:23-28 | Mark 10:46-52

Lazlo was afraid of the dark.¹

So begins an inspired and suspenseful children's book in which a young boy, utterly alone in a cavernous house, will be forced to confront a common childhood fear.

On the book's first page, Lazlo, a solemn child in grey pajamas, plays with toys under a large, curtain-less window. Outside, the sun is setting. Inside, Lazlo side-eyes the dark which creeps slowly across the page.

"The dark lived in the same house as Lazlo," the author writes, "a big place with a creaky roof, smooth, cold windows, and several sets of stairs. . . . All day long the dark would wait in a distant corner . . . pressed up against some old, damp boxes and a chest of drawers nobody ever opened. At night, of course, the dark went out and spread itself against the windows and doors of Lazlo's house. But in the morning the dark would be back in the basement, where it belonged."

As the story unfolds, the pressing nature of Lazlo's fear grows clearer and a certain anticipation of what is to come stirs in the gut. At some point, the reader grows to understand what Lazlo seems to know already. The dark is kept at bay only by time.

There is, it feels, an unfairly thin line between darkness and light. And, Lazlo is suspended there, as he settles down for bed under the warm glow of a single night light. In a moment that is both expected, and yet unsettling, the bulb extinguishes and darkness falls over the scene.

Much like the children they are written for, great children's books have a way of addressing simply those things adults overly complicate. Never shying away from the truth. Rarely suffering fools gladly. Such is the case here.

Fear of the dark in childhood is not uncommon. Yet even as adults a certain fear of the dark still plagues us. We often fear the dark for its lack of any visual stimuli. Put simply, people become afraid when they cannot see what is around them. Why is this?

I suspect that to see what is around you brings a certain confidence about the world; the well-lit world, we know. It is a world that we can understand. The illuminated landscape is one that we can walk confidently in, upright, eyes focused on the point of our choosing. It is in the light then that we feel in control. Or, to speak more honestly, it is in the light that we can most successfully deny that we lack any real control.

Light, therefore, is lauded and darkness to be avoided when at all possible.

¹ Lemony Snicket, "The Dark" (New York: Little, Brown: Young Readers, 2013).

October is the month of Job, at least according to our lectionary. As you may have noticed, it has been the source and subject of our Old Testament reading for four consecutive Sundays. Today, we heard its conclusion. It is a book that is often received as a disturbingly dark narrative. It is certainly not a comfortable or comforting read for most. It weaves the story of Job, who moves from mightily blessed to woefully grieved in a turn so quick that we struggle to find firm footing.

In the beginning, Job basks in the light. He possesses everything, including his own blamelessness. But, as we know, light necessarily engages darkness. And, darkness lurks in the corners of Job's well-lit existence. Over the course of 37 chapters, suspense builds as the dark creeps up on Job slowly from across the page. His flocks are stolen, his children killed, his health ruined. Darkness falls over the scene.

The light has gone out on Job's life as he has known it, and he finds, as so many do, that his beliefs don't quite look the same in the dark. And, in his suffering and anger he is left with only a question and a fear.

Where were you? Job hurls this as an accusation at God. Where were you? And, (really) where are you now?

When darkness falls and strips us of our comfort, of our ways of ordering the world, of our fraught perspective that we are, in fact, safe, secure, and in control, it leaves us with this question on our lips, "Where is God?" To utter this question is risky, as it whispers a deeper truth about our resistance to what we deem darkness: it speaks, if you will, to our ultimate fear. That we may be alone in the darkness after all.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "The reality that troubles the soul most is the apparent absence of God. If God is light, and we often say that this is who God is, than God, in deepest darkness, is gone. There is no soft glowing space of safety in this dark night. There is no comforting sound coming out of it, reassuring the soul that all will be well. Even if comforting friends come around to see how you are doing, they are about as much help as the friends who visited Job on his ash heap. For good or ill, no one can do your work for you while you are in this dark place. It has your name all over it, and the only way out is through."²

What are we meant to do with our question, "Where is God?", and with this particular fear, "That we might be alone after all"? This fear that is uncomfortable, that feels rather unfaithful and, frankly, seems somewhat avoidable if we just look in the other direction long enough. Avoid it. Deny it.

Let us return to our children's book, to young Lazlo. Who, as he is forced to confront his fear might just serve up some valuable wisdom in the way that only children can. Remember, that his night light has failed him. Sitting upright in bed, eyes stretched wide against the darkness, he hears a voice.

"Lazlo," it calls. "Lazlo, I want to show you something." The dark is speaking to Lazlo. In a deliciously tense sequence, we discover that the dark wants to show Lazlo something. Something in the basement. Something in the deepest, darkest, most forgotten part of the basement. Something that Lazlo needs.

Lazlo heeds the call of the dark. Draws closer to it. Moves slowly, carefully, curiously. Descends down the basement stairs into total darkness. The very place where the Dark dwells. It is there that he is shown that a light may be found in the most unexpected of places.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Learning to Walk in the Dark" (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).

He discovers a small lightbulb to be exact, of just the right size for Lazlo's extinguished nightlight. It is small, and yet not insignificant, for it casts the light of a new vision. The dark will be forever present. And yet, something glorious and inescapable dwells there in the darkness. Something wholly other and yet completely for him. Something not to be feared at all.

The book ends, "The dark kept on living with Lazlo, but that never bothered him again."

Presented here is a simple truth that those who have stumbled through the dark and found God there just know. We have no control over the inevitable. As sure as the sun will set, night will fall. As sure as there are night lights, bulbs will extinguish. As sure as the sun rises, tragedy will strike. As sure as joy will come, there will also be sorrow. And yet something glorious and inescapable dwells there in the darkness. Something wholly other and yet completely for us.

Yes, Job's question is our question. Where is God in this darkness? Where is God when I can no longer see?

And yet, the grace he receives is also our grace. Because the God who ultimately spoke to Job from the whirlwind is the God of darkness too.

As Taylor writes, "When we can no longer see the path we are on, when we can no longer read the maps we have brought with us or sense anything in the dark that might tell us where we are, then and only then are we vulnerable to God's protection. This remains true even when we cannot discern God's presence. The only thing the dark night requires of us is to remain conscious. If we can stay with the moment in which God seems most absent, the night will do the rest."³

God will show up. God is there. God is the God of darkness too.

³ Taylor, "Learning to Walk in the Dark"