

## OUT OF THE SHADOWS

“Hello darkness, my old friend” begins a song of some note. These same words are sometimes sung by the Old Testament and the New Testament. Even if not as a friend, darkness shows up from time to time. The Old Testament is haunted by the experience of a foreign power ransacking the people of God’s homeland and holding those people in foreign captivity for close to fifty years. In the New Testament, there’s the crucifixion of Jesus and the subsequent persecution and sometimes martyrdom of his first disciples. From front to back, the Bible sometimes speaks of dark, dark times when God recedes to the shadows. And of course, in three of the four gospels, this is exactly what happens on the day of Jesus’ death.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the sun disappears and darkness blankets the land as Jesus suffers and dies for you and for me. On Good Friday, God recedes to the shadows, as Jesus secures our forgiveness by taking the full brunt of the wrath rightfully reserved for lifelong sinners like you and me. Spiritually, it’s what happens when it gets dark and God recedes to the shadows. God withdraws us from the protective cover of his grace and we experience wrath, the natural consequence of our sins. But just as Scripture warns that God will sometimes recede to the shadows, it just as commonly insists that God shall also eventually reemerge from the shadows in which God has hidden for a time.

In the New Testament, the basis for this confidence is Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. On Easter Sunday, it’s forever proven and proclaimed that God, the Light and Life of the World, shall not be detained by the shadows forever. In the Old Testament, this same confidence exists, but its basis is different. In the Old Testament, it’s God’s creation of all, not Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, which leads some pages of Scripture to sing out, “The sun will come out tomorrow. You can bet your bottom dollar on it.” Our reading from Isaiah is a case in point.

In that reading, as the captivity of God’s people is coming to an end, the prophet announces that with God coming out of the shadows after a long, dark night of the soul, Israel’s return to the Holy Land is immanent. And, again and again, it’s revealed that the prophet’s confidence that God shall come out of the shadows for good is God’s identity as the Creator of heaven and earth. In our reading from Isaiah chapter forty today, God is from the beginning; from the very foundations of the earth. There’s not a force or power which precedes God. The reason and basis for all life, God is responsible for the initial existence and the continuing existence of all that might ever stand in the way of God’s people. At any moment, our reading from Isaiah insists, God can turn off the switch of life that God turned on in the first place; in the process coming out of the shadows for good by dispelling forces and powers that have gotten too big for their britches. Whether it’s on the basis of God’s creative authority or on the basis of God’s authority over sin, death, and the devil, Scripture insists that God shall come out of the shadows for good, just as God will also sometimes recede to the shadows for a time to remind us of how life is apart from his grace.

Now when God does come of the shadows on the basis of one authority or another, one of the things that happens is that we come out of the shadows with our ailments and our illnesses on full display. When the Light responsible for all light is absent, we keep those ailments and those illnesses covered up. But when the God the Light and Life of the World reemerges from the shadows, we open up. We’re no longer crippled by shame and fear. We no longer hunker down in defensive postures which aim to keep things from getting worse than they already are. It’s precisely what happens when Jesus shows up in Mark’s gospel.

I mean: Last week we did hear that Jesus showed up in Capernaum and his piercing light revealed the failings of the religious status quo and scared a demon not just silent, but off to another zip code entirely. This is God coming out of the shadows for good. And what happens next—what happens today? First a sick mother-in-law is brought of the shadows for healing. Then, the hospitals

are emptied, the skeletons are brought out of the closet, and the sanitariums are vacated with Capernaum bringing all of its sick and possessed to Jesus for healing. This is the fear of failure taking flight. This is shame being told to take a hike. This is people coming out of the shadows, out of their defensive positions and postures, to be healed. And Jesus, the Light and Life of the World delivers; healing and exorcizing up a storm. Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever laid it all out there for Jesus, with him more than coming through in the clutch?

If you haven't, it can happen today or any other time we come together. Through these mutual gatherings, God is always coming out of the shadows for good. Sometimes it's through the words of Scripture or through words inspired by Scripture. Sometimes it's through communion and the remembrance or celebration of baptism. Sometimes it's through the comfort and consolation offered through and by our siblings in Christ. One way or another it happens. Through these mutual gatherings, God comes out of the shadows for good. May the Holy Spirit lead us to take full advantage of these opportunities. May we come out of the shadows with our ailments and our illnesses. May we dispense with fear, send shame packing, and put it all out there with no defensiveness at all so we might be healed or at least begin our journey toward healing. And then after the healing process is completed or at least underway, let's not retreat to the shadows again, but stay out of the shadows for others; positioning ourselves to be agents and means of healing whenever Christ is ready to use us in this way.

This is, after all, the progression in our reading from Mark. Jesus comes out of the shadows in Capernaum. Next, Simon Peter's mother-in-law and her illness are brought out of the shadows for healing. And then, after being healed, the first female disciple mentioned in Mark's gospel stays out of the shadows to serve the Church Jesus is in the process of forming. It's where Mark first telegraphs Jesus' later assertion that in his Church the greatest of all shall be the servant of all. It's how it's supposed to go according to Mark. God comes out of the shadows with light, love, and healing. In response, we come out of the shadows allowing all of our illnesses and ailments to be exposed by the light of day. And then, after healing concludes or at least gets underway, we stay out of the shadows for others so God's light, love, and healing might flow through us whenever God deems the time to be right.

And so, as I've encouraged you to come out of the shadows today, let me be vulnerable myself and thank you for all the times you've knowingly or unknowingly stayed out of the shadows for me. As you might recall, our time together began with a tragedy. Very soon the 19<sup>th</sup> of February will mark the fifth anniversary of my kid sister Amy's death at the age of forty-four when her youngest wasn't even yet seven. A long journey towards healing began on that day and you've knowingly and unknowingly helped it along, as you've also knowingly and unknowingly helped me travel down other difficult paths in my life as a pastor. Thank you! It's happened because you stayed out of the shadows for others after receiving some measure of healing yourself; leaving yourself out there for God to use as God saw fit. Whether it be you or me, may this be something the Holy Spirit continues as long as we gather together as church. Amen!