

Wildwood Mennonite Church
Me & You & Darkness in View
Mar. 11, 2018
(Numbers 21:4-9)

So, “Me and You and Darkness in View.” That’s the title given in the Leader for the 4th Sunday of Lent. It might have had a more comforting feel if it had been “Me and You and Darkness in the Rear-View Mirror.” You know, behind us? Past? Like those Old Testament stories of Cain and Abel where jealousy leads to anger, and ends in death. Or the story of another set of brothers, twins, Jacob and Esau, one favoured by Mom and the other by Dad. It led to plenty of tension and brokenness that cast a dark shadow on the family and faith story. Oh yes, and David, that story about him coveting another man’s wife. Some pretty dark stories in the past.

Now don’t get me wrong, not all the Old Testament stories make one face darkness like we find in these stories. There are amazing stories like the one of Ruth and Naomi. Yes, they went through their own dark times, the losses of spouses and dreams. But they faced that darkness together and found a new life filled with hope.

The Old Testament has many encouraging teachings that give guidance and hope and light, to face our darkness, like Psalm 119:105 where we read, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path,” wise, instructive words that refer to many other teachings that were written to guide us in a good way.

Being the humans that we are, we don’t always follow the well-lit path the Psalmist suggested. Sometimes it just seems easier to veer off that path and follow one of our own making.

When I was twenty, I took a year off from school to work as a Care Aide in a long term care facility in North Kildonan, Winnipeg. Sometimes when I came off of the evening shift a little late, I was afraid I would miss the last bus if I took the longer, street-lit route. So I took the short cut and ran through the tall grass of a dark open field to get to my bus stop, praying that I would get there safely. Fortunately, I always made it without incident.

That image kept coming back to me as I reflected on the theme for today. It struck me that even when we know the potential dangers of the darkness, we can find ourselves going there sometimes anyway. The dark places seem to lurk at the edges of our lives.

We Grumble

The scripture that we read this morning from the book of Numbers describes a darkness that hung over the children of Israel; growing impatience leading to grumbling and complaining against both Yhwh and Moses. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread and no water, and we detest this miserable food.’ Okay, there was food but they didn’t like it.

The memory of the miraculous escape from hard labor in Egypt faded quickly in the desert, and the promise of a land in the future seemed dim. Things weren't as good as they used to be. So one person complained to another, and together they complained to a few more and so it went. What kind of a leader was Moses anyway? Did he have a clue of what he was doing? And where was Yhwh in this whole picture?

This sounds familiar. I have to admit that I see myself in this story, and I'm not Yhwh and I'm not Moses. I've found myself in those desert places, dry and dust covered. Rather than reflecting on the situation, and problem solving with the community, I've given in to my frustrations. In times like that I haven't paused to think about what effect my complaints or the tone of my voice will have on others in the community. Sometimes I've even rationalized that I was just being honest, and honesty is good, right? I have felt myself entering a dark place that has cast a shadow over my relationship with others. I regret those times.

Expectations

When Moses agreed to lead the children of Israel, it wasn't because he was the first one to raise his hand. He had excuses. Speaking wasn't his forte. Surely there must be someone else. Perhaps he was as afraid of what he might say as he was of not finding words at all.

But Yhwh persisted and promised to be with Moses and he reluctantly agreed to lead the people knowing it was going to be a tough job. I doubt the people thought about the enormity of the task he was given. They were just grateful that somebody was willing to take on the job. But it didn't take them long to forget the miraculous escape from Egypt and to begin expressing their unhappiness.

The dynamic between leaders and the people is a delicate one. Leaders must be trusted and those being led must be willing to work together as a team. This can be challenging. It is easy to be critical of leadership when they lead us in ways that stretch us beyond our comfort zones. We don't know where this will go or what the outcome might be. We may become unhappy. Will we allow ourselves to brood and simmer over this until we become angry? Will we become demanding, calling others to shift to our way of thinking?

If we begin focusing on the negative or on what annoys us, we can find ourselves heading in a downward spiral. We may express ourselves in hurtful ways. The writer of the book of James, stressing the importance of thinking carefully before we speak, wrote these words, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." As Christ followers we have been called to build each other up, so when we fail and speak words that hurt, we have a responsibility to make things right.

Working through the Tough Stuff

Me and you. How do we work through the tough stuff in ways that will keep our relationships intact even if we come out with different conclusions? How do we work at keeping the lines of communication open when we don't see eye to eye? What is our

commitment to respectfully agree to disagree? Sure, things won't always be our preference but maybe, just maybe, if we allow ourselves to enter into the new thing, whether an unfamiliar hymn or new worship practise, maybe we too will meet God in a new way.

I remember a Sunday Evening service we were preparing in another church. We were going to be re-enacting the Last Supper from the disciples' perspective before having Communion. One of the older members had learned of this and complained that this would not go over well; it had never been done this way before. This person chose not to attend. However, there was a good turn out and when the service was over several other older members commented that this was the most meaningful communion they had ever experienced.

Boxes

There are many ways in which we may experience darkness.

Another darkness I see comes in the form of boxes. You know, the one I might have put you in, or maybe you put me in? They might be labeled liberal or conservative, old-fashioned or new-fangled, know-it-all or do-gooder, foreigner or any number of other names. Boxes are easy places to put people when we don't really want to engage with them. Putting someone in a box makes it difficult for any change to ever happen in the relationship. It stifles the growth of both the one inside and the one outside of the box.

I have some boxes I'm not proud of, some prejudices that I'm still working at breaking down. I have struggled with a negative attitude toward persons who use the practice of bartering. It seems to happen every year when we sell canaries. Why does this bother me so, you might ask? I think it is because almost every bird we buy costs more than what we charge for ours. So I think our price is fair already.

But something happened this winter that has put a crack into that box. One day, when we delivered birds to someone who comes from this tradition, and who we had never met before, he invited us for supper. We had to decline because of other commitments but he said, "If you can't stay for supper, you have to at least take some food with you." And quite honestly, I was overwhelmed by such hospitality when we had just met over a transaction. Without knowing it, he exposed one of my dark corners. Maybe bartering is about relationships too.

Jesus Stirred the Pot

When we look at the days of Jesus ministry, we can see how difficult it was for the religious establishment to catch a new vision. Jesus confronted the status quo and the 'just like us' mentality. He broke down the dividing walls between the Jew and the Gentile, the women and the men, people from different sides of town. For some it was maddening and unsettling. For others it was exciting and hopeful. But by the time it came to what we know as Good Friday, there was growing dis-ease, and even Judas, one of Jesus disciples, broke rank with the group and followed his own dark path.

The human dynamic hasn't changed that much over the years. Each of us has been shaped by the faith experiences of our childhood and growing up years. And though we have all made many adjustments and changes over the years, like the Believers of the first century, we can still find ourselves challenged and uncomfortable with some of the ways Jesus stirs the pot. At times, we too long for the familiarity of Egypt.

Working at Lent's Shadows

The season of Lent provides us the opportunity to reflect on our faith and life in this community. Are there shadows that hover over us that we don't feel good about? Are we aware of brokenness that requires us to take a step in reconciliation? Do we need to help each other resolve differences just as the Philippians were encouraged to help Euodia and Syntyche?

As a community we have worked at developing some tools that have helped us to listen and speak in respectful ways. The Behavioural Covenant has served as a useful guide and we often read it before our congregational meetings as a reminder of how we want to interact together so that all will be respected. In our Identity Statement we have likewise committed ourselves to bring out the best in **each other** and **our world** by preparing space to listen and speak.

Like the early disciples, we come from many different experiences and with the full range of personality types. We don't always understand each other, and we certainly don't always agree. We fall short of the ideal of listening and speaking when we feel that our opinions or our stories deserve more air time than those of others. How well we live together depends less on our sameness than on our **attitudes** toward those who see things differently than we do. It requires a shift in focus.

The Snakes

Yhwh provided that shift of focus for the children of Israel in the desert with an infestation of snakes. People panicked. Many were bitten and some even died. They recognized this as punishment for their destructive words and actions and they acknowledged their wrong doing.

Interestingly, Yhwh didn't remove the snakes but instructed Moses to create a bronze snake that anyone who had been bitten could look at, and their life would be spared. The reality of the darkness was still there, but so was the saving grace of Yhwh. Look, believe and live! Similarly, the cross behind me that has gradually become more obvious each week reminds us that it is faith in the resurrected Jesus, the Light of the World, that can guide us toward paths of healing.

In Conclusion

We've come a long ways since the bronze snake in the desert, but we're still on the journey. As Christians, we are moving toward the crucifixion. There is darkness in view. But we also have the vantage point of being able to look beyond the cross to a resurrected Jesus who wants to help us walk in the light. As Paul wrote to the

Ephesians, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God.”

As we go from here, may we seek to walk in the light encouraged by Paul words to the Philippians: “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” May it be so with us.