



Sermons from

**FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN**
Ann Arbor | Michigan

“OUT OF DARKNESS”

The Rev. Evans McGowan
April 14, 2013 - 8, 9:30, 11:00am.
Third Sunday of Easter
Psalm 30
Acts 9:1-20

One of my favorite and scariest things to do is to go spelunking. I remember one particular trip to Wind Cave in Pennsylvania with my friend Andrew. We had to ask several locals as to the whereabouts of the cave – this wasn't one with spotlights, helmets and a tour guide. We found our way deep into the tunnels of the cave when Andrew's flashlight went out. “No worries,” I said, unbuckling my pack, “I've got some extra batteries right–” At that moment my headlamp snapped off my head, hit the ground, and went out. In the pitch dark, I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed.

There are times in our lives when the lights go out, when we are plunged into darkness. We want desperately to turn off the dark, for someone to turn back on the lights. We are lost and cannot find our bearings. Perhaps it's a death of a family member or friend. Perhaps a spouse leaves unexpectedly. Perhaps we are laid off from our job, or get an unexpected diagnosis from the doctor, or find out we didn't pass a certain test or exam. Our whole world comes crumbling in, and our senses aren't able to do what they're supposed to do: make sense of an impossible situation. If we are to make it out of these times of darkness, we need a helping hand. We must utilize our other senses. And we must wait until the light returns.

In this time of crisis and confusion, our choices become clarifying. We are forced to focus on the one thing needful – getting our bearings and finding our way out of the darkness. As we learn to live by faith and not by sight, we embody what Kierkegaard called the “knight of faith,” to boldly go where we have never gone before, riding on into darkness until we emerge once more in the light.

So there we were in Wind Cave, unable to see anything. I felt one with the darkness, our bodies and voices swallowed by the void. The one thing needful was to make sure we were all right, and then find a light. My eyes useless, I felt for the zipper of my backpack, opened it and stuck my hand in, rumbling around until I found a lighter. The flickering light wasn't much, but it allowed us to find our backup flashlights and batteries. Later, emerging from the cave, we gasped the fresh air and set our faces to the fading sun; lovers of the light.

We were probably in the dark for three minutes, but Saul was blinded for three days. And for possibly three months or more he had been breathing threats and murder against those who said Jesus was raised from the grave and the true Messiah. “Breathing” in the Greek can be translated as “consumed,” an “in-blowing” of hatred that had hardened his heart and set him on a mission to defend the Jewish faith. And in this heart of darkness he is plunged into a deeper darkness, blinded by the light of Christ. He is unable to see, and his companions must lead him by the hand into Damascus, where he does not eat or drink for three days. I wonder what he was thinking during this time. I wonder what he was praying.

⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
‘I shall never be moved.’

⁷ By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁹ ‘What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?’

¹⁰ Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!’

And then God visits Ananias, whose name means “God is gracious.” Will God be gracious to Saul? Will Ananias be gracious? Will God’s grace extend to our enemies, the very ones who persecute us? Is God’s love strong enough to melt the hardened heart? Are we brave enough to live out God’s love in the face of such darkness in the world?

Ananias does follow God’s command, calling his enemy Brother Saul, and laying hands on him. Saul’s sight is restored. Saul, soon to be Paul, now has new eyes, and sees Jesus as the Son of God; sees all of us as sons and daughters of the Most High; and the gospel of grace and truth and love spreads throughout the land, with over a third of the books in the New Testament attributed to him.

Can you hear Saul become the psalmist and cry out these words:

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³ O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,

¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.

Like Saul, in times of darkness, we are forced to take stock of our senses, to wrestle with the fears deep within our hearts. As the bluegrass band Mumford & Sons, sings,

“But oh, my heart was flawed
I knew my weakness
So hold my hand
Consign me not to darkness.”

We desire a light or a hope or a hand – anything – to get us through this darkness. Consign us not to darkness, lead us not to death, but the way everlasting.

The well-known film critic Roger Ebert, who passed away recently, refused to be consigned to darkness during his long battle with cancer. A couple of years ago he wrote an essay called “I do not fear death,” where he says “kindness” covers all of his beliefs. He is in good company. The Dali Lama once said, “My religion is kindness” and the author Karen Armstrong wrote an excellent book on how to enact kindness, called, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life.

And isn't kindness all we have to offer? Isn't kindness all we long to receive? The Hebrew word is *chesed*, translated as loving-kindness. Don't we all want a little more kindness?

There are many people in the congregation today who are walking through a time of darkness. Whether we are Stephen Ministers, deacons, elders or members of this body, we are called to be lovers of the light, to offer loving-kindness to all. Yet we are not yet out of darkness.

With so many suffering from depression and other mental disease... We are not yet out of darkness.

With over 3,400 gun-related deaths in the U.S. since the Newtown massacre... We are not yet out of darkness.

With 1 in 6 children in our county facing food insecurity... We are not yet out of darkness.

And with young women committing suicide after their accused juvenile rapists go uncharged... we are not yet out of darkness.

We are not yet out of darkness, but we do have a hand to hold, a light to follow, a call to answer. Weeping may last the night, but joy comes in the morning. Do we really believe the light will come? Do we really believe love can change the world? Will we reach out a hand in the darkness?

As we fumble in the dark, uncertain of where we are going or if we might make it through, let us be lovers of the light, showing kindness to one another and compassion in the face of great suffering. Step by step, hand in hand, we just might make it through. And whether we're in the dark or in the light, in this life or the next, may God's gift of faith sustain us, Christ's gift of hope inspire us, and the Spirit's gift of love enliven us, this day and forevermore. Amen.

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