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Proper 28A
Peace, Seattle
November 16, 2014
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, 1 Thess 5:1-11
Psalm 90, Matthew 25:14-30

CHILDREN OF LIGHT

This season of waning light and growing darkness always feel like a descent to me.
In spite of the brightness of recent days, we can expect to lose another hour of daylight between now and the winter solstice.

To stave off feelings of vulnerability we check the condition of our tires, have our furnaces serviced, and stock up on candles and batteries—or we should. We got a little "dress rehearsal" of what can happen a couple weeks back when the first windstorm of the season knocked out power overnight.

This time of year, with a chill in the air, we're on the hunt for places and people who offer us warmth and stave off the darkness; we look for something that will keep the fires of hope burning.

But the sacred texts that confront us these Sundays of November—and "confront" is the right word—instead of assuaging our sense of vulnerability—seem bent on increasing it!

Warnings, threats, predictions of doom… UGH! Would we have even shown up today if we'd known what we were in for?

In the chilling lines of today's reading from the prophet Zephaniah, hope certainly feels hidden. Almighty God is coming to set things straight, cries the prophet, and all the things we hold on to so dearly will melt away—security, wealth, future, even ourselves; a day of darkness and gloom, which nothing and no one will survive.[1] Uff-dah!

And Zephaniah, as it turns out, is not alone!

Psalm 90, the great song of Moses put to music by the great hymnwriter Isaac Watts, reminds us that
> TIME, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all our years away;
> they fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op'ning day."

St. Paul follows suit, warning that God will come like a thief in the night. And finally, Jesus' parable ends with the rejected steward gnashing his teeth in the outer darkness.
Yes, we're in the territory of dark drama here folks!

Now a Lutheran theological reading of these texts is rather straightforward:
- We are in bondage to sins dark shadows and cannot free ourselves.
- And the function of these texts, as LAW, is to awaken us to this inescapable truth; to remind us, in no uncertain terms, of our in-ability to live in the light on our own, fulfilling God's will for our lives and this world. Thus they drive us to our only hope of redemption: Jesus Christ.
- We are destined for failure, but when we put our trust in the One who went to hell and back for our sake, our crucified and risen Lord, our destiny is transformed.
- When the emblems of security with which we surround ourselves begin to melt away, our true hope is revealed—a hope grounded in God's son, Jesus, who reveals God's mercy to us.[2]

[1] Some of the language in this paragraph is taken from Amanda Kempthorne, *God Pause* for Monday, 11/10/2014
[2] Ibid.

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The LAW, ultimately, is in service to the GOSPEL; or, put another way…
DARKNESS is in service to the LIGHT.

In his potent little book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Life of Vocation*, Parker Palmer writes:

> Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands…a transformative journey—full of hardships, darkness, and peril—to a sacred center …
>
> But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. Darkness is not the whole of the story, but it is the part of the story most often left untold…Many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our [own] lives.[3]

Palmer has the Scriptures on his side. One of the blessings of our faith tradition is the wisdom our spiritual ancestors expressed in not removing or sanitizing experiences of the dark side from the stories they preserved and passed on to us, but instead including them, so they can stand as markers for us as we, too, muddle our way through this journey of being human.

Our world is populated with shadows, within and without. And until we are willing to own that truth, we will never be able to journey to that "center, full of light," of which the scriptures speak.

When Paul writes: "You, beloved, are not in darkness, for you are children of light and of the day," he's testifying to the power of God to move us from the realm of dark shadows to the realm of light.

The mystery we can't fully fathom is how God does so. For God manifests this power in the most unexpected way—by entering the human story through poverty and exile, and finally embracing humanity at our worst.

The One who did not seek to exploit his divine origin but rather emptied himself, even to the point of death on a cross, he has experienced human darkness in its fiercest forms. Whatever shadows and dark places we have or will endure, we can be confident he has been there before us and will go there with us once again.

What ARE we destined for? For darkness? No.

"You, beloved, are not in darkness" testifies Paul, "for you are all children of light and children of the day. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."

When we are washed in baptismal waters our lives become bound to his life—and not only his life but his death, too. Entering the darkness of the tomb with him, we become dead to everything that masquerades as God in our lives, and begin learning to put our trust in him first and always.

The shadows of our lives don't magically disappear, but his light becomes for us the light that scatters all darkness; and with this Light now in us, fear no longer dominates our lives. Trusting in Christ's presence above us below us, behind and before us (as St. Patrick says) we take risks—loving and forgiving, serving and sharing, spreading good news like seeds.

[3] Parker Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Life of Vocation*, p. 18

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Watered by grace, our barren trees grow, our hands blossom, and our lives—lived in community—bring forth fruit that heals our neighbors' grief and pain.

The days may be growing shorter, and the nights longer; but rooted in the soil of grace, we look toward God's new day, with light in our eyes and hope in our hearts. For in Christ we have glimpsed our destiny, and it is glorious!

Amen.