

The Light Still Shines

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 7, 2020 (Trinity Sunday)
Friendship Presbyterian Church

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.
(John 1:1-5, NRSV)

In the sixth of the eight Harry Potter movies, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, a most memorable scene takes place at the end. It is of the death of Albus Dumbledore, young Harry's great mentor and most powerful counter to the evil of the Dark Lord Voldemort. You don't have to be familiar with the Harry Potter series to appreciate the significance of the scene.

Dumbledore lies dead in the Hogwarts School courtyard, killed by an apparent traitor. Hundreds of students gather around his body in stunned silence and disbelief, as the sky turns dark as night. The menacing clouds take on a skull-like appearance – a symbol of Voldemort's evil – with a gaping jaw as if soon to swallow up all the goodness and beauty left in the world. It is a moment rife with the spirit of despair.

But then, just as hopelessness would descend, one wizard slowly held up her wand to the sky – its shining tip pointed at the very mouth of gloom and death. Another followed her example. And then another, and another, until *hundreds* of wands, with their small tips of light, were pointed at the sky, and the skull-shaped cloud dissipated. Together, they stood in defiant faith that against all odds, and whatever the cost, that the Light still shines.

But whether expressed in fantasy or in the gospel itself, there's *no one* who doesn't sometimes wonder. No one who has ever grappled with the realities of the world has not been pierced by the thought that in the end the Shadow might be all there is.

We've all been wearied by the COVID-19 pandemic, saddened to be separated from our loved ones, from our church family, and perhaps left a little numb at the dreary thought that this is not going away anytime soon.

And then there are the events of just the last week and a half ... the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis ... being only the latest in a long line, sadly revealing again – to anyone willing to see – the gross racial injustice that lies, not on the fringes but at the very *heart* of America, and that has been denied or ignored or minimized by us for far, far too long. The protests that have risen up all over the country are ample testimony to this hard truth.

That some of these protests have devolved into acts of rioting and looting is heartbreaking, but as Martin Luther King observed, not surprising. Riots don't develop out of thin air. Hundreds of years of injustice – and silent indifference to it – is *itself* violence against the human spirit, and

that this should prove to be a crucible for despair and rage which may spin out of control is sadly inevitable. And this leads to the greatest tragedy of all – that what might be a teachable moment is imperiled as legitimate cries for “Order!” risk drowning out *equally legitimate* cries for “Justice!” And the sad cycle continues.

And for us, now, It may feel as if the clouds are slowly gathering, as in that story, as if soon to swallow up all the goodness and beauty left in the world. Perhaps you too know the longing that tears your heart in two as you grasp on to hope that the Light still shines.

A few years ago, my wife and I heard a talk given by my favorite professor from my college days – a philosophy professor named Dr. John Lachs. I *promised* my wife she would enjoy hearing him – and if nothing else she would think he was really cute ... after all, he is a short, bald 85 year-old Hungarian with a mischievous sense of humor. I was not let down, and she was not disappointed.

The great question which Dr. Lachs posed that evening was as poignant as it was pressing: *What if this is as good as it gets?* Since the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, we in the West have been marked by our deep faith in limitless progress. This faith has deep roots in the Protestant Reformation ... which after all gave the world a strong doctrine of the dignity and responsibility of the individual, and laid the seeds for capitalism and participatory democracy.

It was a simple faith: *the powerful idea that tomorrow will be better than today.* And then as it grew up and spread on these shores ... came the American way of life, the American Dream, all pursued in a supposedly Christian nation in which Christian ideals and the American way (usually seen as the same thing) would prevail, with – of course – “liberty and justice for all”.

How do you think that’s been working out?

The world as we experience it today can be overwhelming. Between the threat of the coronavirus, and now the unrest across the country stemming from long-time racial injustice, it may sometimes feel like the skies are turning dark and hope is slipping away.

And so, how *do* we respond to the evils and chaos around us? This is where faith gets real. How can we live with hope in the face of so many reasons to despair? How can we hold on and keep believing that the Light still shines?

The only way to keep believing that the Light still shines is to look and live for where the Light *is* ... where Jesus Christ – the Light of the World – is. And the scriptures are very clear *where* to look, and just as importantly, where *not* to look.

For Christ is nowhere to be found in a selfishness that poses as freedom, even “religious freedom” – but in the end, amounts to a “freedom” *without responsibility*, putting others at risk.

Christ is nowhere to be found in the exploitation of fears and prejudice, nor in the incitement and escalation of violence.

Christ is not in the idolization of “domination,” at the expense of the hard work of understanding, nor in any distraction that would draw us away from truly hearing the cry for racial justice, grasping its depth, and grappling with its challenge.

Christ is not in these because, in his Cross, he identifies with the *victims* of any social order, not the brutalizers ... with those at the bottom, not at the top. He identifies with the lovers, the healers, and the helpers, not the dealers of Death.

He is George Floyd. He is Ahmaud Arbery. He is Breonna Taylor.

He is David Dorn, a retired police captain shot by looters in St Louis.

He is every black mother who worries about her son coming home safely.

He is the Michigan sheriff who joined peaceful marchers in their demands for change ... He is the National Guard soldiers in Nashville who laid down their shields in a show of vulnerability and trust ... He is the Black Lives Matter members and the police officers who danced together in the streets of Carrollton ...

He is all the nurses and doctors and first responders who have worked inhuman hours and have put their lives on the line every day – and who know better than anyone that this disease disproportionately impacts communities of color.

He is everyone on a ventilator. He is everyone who can't breathe.

And for us to truly see Christ in all these places, and so to see and believe in the *Light*, we have to face the darkness, and allow ourselves to feel the pain and to hear the cries of others. The roots of racial and social injustice in America are *very* deep, and the fruits of past sins are abundantly manifest today.

This is a time for listening to the stories of others, even or *especially* when we don't think we really “understand” them. This is a time for recommitment to the way of Christ, who calls to us through the “least of these.”

I know this sounds like a lot, because it *is*. It means unlearning some things that we have learned and going to some places we'd rather not go. It is indeed a calling which is far bigger than anything we can accomplish on our own. As I seek to follow this call in my own life, it drives me to my knees, making me aware of my own inadequacy, my own complicity in sinful systems and structures, my own need for a grace that can take this compromised heart and make it break.

It drives me to *prayer*, seeking that repentance and empowerment that only God can provide. Through prayer alone can we be prepared to follow the path of the Spirit –

- Through prayers of *silence* in which we, at last, quiet our own voices ...
- Through prayers of *confession* in which we take responsibility and own that we can't separate ourselves from the problems which would threaten to engulf us ...
- Through prayers of *lamentation* in which we cry out, joining voices, for the pain and needless suffering of others ...
- Through prayers of *intercession*
 - for families broken by unemployment, violence, or injustice,
 - for communities wracked by hopelessness and mistrust,
 - and for leaders to put away their pride, that they may hear and submit to the prophetic word ...
- Through prayers of *supplication* in which we seek God's wisdom to see the path being blazed before us, and for the courage to walk it ...
- And through prayers of *thanksgiving* in which we revel in even the smallest victories which the Spirit brings into being.

The way ahead, no doubt, is long and hard. But our faith, expressed in action and empowered by prayer, is that the future in which "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" *will*, one day, be true for all of God's children.

This is that defiant faith which invites us today, which would call us to never lose hope, for we may see in the midst of all that is broken, the face of that One who is making all things new, and so find the strength to remain standing – against all odds, and whatever the cost – because we know that the Light still shines.

To the glory of God. Amen.