

It Was Now Dark, And Jesus Had Not Yet Come To Them

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on July 27, 1997: Scripture Lessons: John 6:1-21.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

John tells us: "It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them." The darkness through which the disciples rowed across the Sea of Galilee represents the darkness in this world through which the church navigates. James S. Stewart once said, "Darkness thrusts itself inexorably into the very structure of our human life and history" - there *is* darkness in the world, thick darkness. William Conrad wrote about "the heart of darkness". Eugene O'Neill spoke of a "long day's journey into night." Dylan Thomas cried out, "Do not go gentle into that good night... rage, rage against the dying of the light." And many of us *have* experienced and *are* experiencing at this very moment darkness and Jesus has not yet come.

John's writes, "When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea" (the Sea of Galilee which is about 14 miles wide and 8 miles long). "They got into a boat and started across the sea to Capernaum (about 7 miles away). It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them." That's strange! The disciples had no reason to expect Jesus once they were out at sea. It would be as if we were to read that President Clinton, leaving his wife Hillary at the White House, boarded Air Force One which embarked upon its flight across the Atlantic. Several hours later Hillary had not yet joined him. Of course not, not after the plane was in the air. Likewise, the disciples had no reason to expect Jesus to come to them when they were out in the middle of the sea of Galilee. John is writing from the point of view of one who had been in that boat and now, many years later, is writing the story. As he wrote, he knew, of course, that before the night was over the Lord had joined the disciples.

"It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them." Many time we're like those disciples. We're in the dark. We're battling the storm. We're working hard, rowing, and Jesus has not yet come. History has had many dark nights. Some of you lived through the dark night of World War II. You may be familiar with the story of the four chaplains. On Friday, January 22, 1943 the troop carrier *S.S. Dorchester* embarked from her pier in New York City. On board

were 904 soldiers, including four Navy chaplains. Two were Protestants, one was a Jewish rabbi, and the fourth was a Roman Catholic priest. Their destination was Greenland. After a fueling stop in St. John's, Newfoundland, the ship headed out into waters infested with Nazi U-boats. On February 2 a ship in the convoy detected a submarine. The convoy began to take evasive action. Aboard the *Dorchester*, the captain ordered the men to sleep in their clothing, with life jackets close at hand. Just after midnight on February 3, with the GIs curled into their bunks, a torpedo slammed into the side of the *Dorchester*. The wound was mortal. The *Dorchester* took on water rapidly and began listing to starboard. In spite of all the practice alerts, nothing seemed to go right. Without power, the radio was silenced. No one thought to send up a distress flare, and the escort vessels pushed on into the darkness, unaware that the *Dorchester* was sinking. Overcrowded lifeboats capsized; rafts drifted away before anyone could reach them. It was dark and Jesus had not yet come. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. Then they saw Jesus walking on the sea in the person of those four chaplains. The testimony of survivors tells us that the sole order amidst all the chaos came from the four chaplains, who suddenly appeared on the steeply sloping starboard side. Calmly they guided men to their boat stations. They opened a storage locker and distributed life jackets. Then they coaxed the men, frozen with fear, over the side. One survivor said, "I could hear men crying, pleading, praying, swearing. I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage like Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples saying, 'It is I; be not afraid'". Another survivor saw the four chaplains handing out life jackets from the locker until there were no more left. When there were no more life jackets the chaplains took off their own and handed them out. The Protestant chaplains didn't call out to Protestants when they handed out their life-jackets, nor did the Jewish rabbi save his for a Jew, or priest for a Catholic. Many of the survivors remember looking back as they swam away. From the sinking ship they saw the chaplains standing - their arms linked- braced against the slanting deck. They were praying. And as the ship sank they appeared for a moment to be standing on the ocean.

Some of you experienced war as hell in Vietnam. Some of you may have found yourselves in the darkness, praying and wondering when, if ever, Jesus was going to arrive. And maybe he finally did in the person of a medic or a nurse or a letter or a phone call. You know from personal experience that history has had its dark nights. And history may still have more dark nights. But we trust that Christ, our God, who came to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee will not abandoned the world to darkness - but will come and assure that we arrive to where God wants this world to go.

So history has had its dark nights but, more personally, many in our congregation have experienced or are now experiencing darkness in your lives: it may be a failure of business, a loss of health, a shattered romance, the break up of a family and Jesus has not yet come. That's very difficult to deal with because we live at a time that demands instant answers to prayers, instant solutions to problems-but Jesus doesn't come instantly to deliver us from our darkness. Marva Dawn in her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* speaks of how our society idolizes of efficiency. Efficiency! Immediacy! For example, many people don't read anything they can't immediately understand. Many people appreciate artwork only if they can immediately understand it. They don't appreciate music unless it gives them immediate sensations of pleasure. Many of us don't take time to appreciate great art and great music.

Marva Dawn goes on to explain how many people want a religious faith that offers immediate answers to problems that have been building for years. And, she says, so many today reject the real Jesus for a MacJesus. When Jesus doesn't show up pronto-instantly-immediately-to solve our problems and get us through our difficulties and meet our needs we often reject him and turn to MacJesus - a Jesus that gives us simple, immediate, answers to complex problems, a MacJesus that tastes good but isn't very nutritious. As Christians we must endure the night - we don't expect immediate answers although we're glad when we get them. We don't look for a quick fix. We continue to row against the wind and waves - saying to ourselves and to one another, "It is dark, and Jesus has not yet come... but he will. And I'll keep rowing until he does."

So there's the darkness in history, our personal darkness and, finally, there's the darkness of death. As we grow older more and more of our friends and loved ones die. We become increasingly aware that we must all pass through the valley of the shadow of death. We are all at peril on the sea. And whenever I've preached on the darkness of death there have been listeners who say to me afterward, "Don't preach about death. It's so depressing. Preach about something uplifting and positive." But the Gospel of the resurrection gives Christians hope in the face of death. Resurrection hope enables Christians to face the darkness of death with courage.

Several years ago a Northeaster hit the New England coast. The storm came up so quickly that many boats found themselves on the open ocean facing gale force winds. The Coast Guard was called out to rescue a number of ships that were floundering. As the sailors prepared to go out, one young trembling recruit turned to his commanding officer and said, "If we go out into that storm, we'll never get back." His commanding officer answered, "We have to go out into the storm. We don't have to come back." Christ's resurrection gives Christians courage that kind of courage in the face of death. In the face of death, there's no more positive word than the word of Christ who comes to us in the darkness assuring us, "It is I; be not afraid." Lord Tennyson understood when he wrote.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

I've spoken of the darkness of history, the dark night of the soul, and the darkness of death - each of them transfigured by the appearance of Christ. We all long for Christ when we're in the dark. But so many people are missing him.

Several weeks ago Kay and I stopped at Maplehoff Dairy in Quarryville for some milk. A woman came out of the store with an older man who was evidently her father. She appeared to be in her forties or early fifties and he looked like he was in his seventies. They both carried a large ice cream sundae piled high with the works: hot fudge, whipped cream, nuts, M and Ms, Reeses pieces, everything. They sat down and the man looked at his daughter and said, "There's only one thing missing." Kay looked at the brimming Sundaes and said, "What possibly could be missing?" The woman turned to Kay and said, "His wife is missing. They'd been married over fifty years. We miss her."

What's missing from the lives of so many people is Jesus and that's sad. We have everything else. We have everything we need. We have a home. We have cars. We have boats. We have vacations. We have money in the bank. We have few fears. But Jesus is missing from our daily lives. So many are in the dark concerning the meaning and purpose of life and the value of what's really important. We're rowing. We're battling the wind and the waves all by ourselves but we don't seem to be getting anywhere. I often feel this way. We need Someone to take us, not to where we want to go, but where God wants us to be. What we need is the presence of Christ, and his voice saying, "It is I; be not afraid."

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have placed within the hearts of all your children a longing for your Word and a hunger for your truth. Grant that, believing in the One whom you have sent, we may know him to be the true bread of heaven and food of eternal life, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.