

## *Waiting in the Dark*

Psalm 139:1-12

Sunday – December 1, 2024

Pastor Vern Christopherson

John Kinney, former dean of Virginia Union School of Theology, tells a story about his granddaughter. The two of them were spending time together during summer vacation. One evening they drove out into the country. Kinney set a blanket down on the grass and invited his granddaughter to join him. She snuggled up close. Pretty soon the two of them were lying on their backs and peering up into the night sky. The little girl, who lived in the city, was absolutely mesmerized by all the light. She said excitedly, “There are sixtillion stars.” Then she added, “Papa, some things you just can’t see until it gets dark.”

If John Kinney’s granddaughter is right, then Advent can be a time for us to “see.” Darkness is all around us. At 44° latitude north, we spend a majority of our December days in the dark...moving toward the winter solstice. I’m not especially fond of the shorter days, but I find that the darkness can be a good thing. In the summer, when it’s light outside long into the evening, I feel as if I should be up and keeping busy. But as the cold and dark of winter settle in, I’m better able to pause, get quiet, think, read, and pray.

We experience darkness in other ways too, of course – emotionally, spiritually, financially – anywhere, anytime we need light to break in. Difficult though the darkness may be, it can give us a capacity for sight that we do not otherwise possess. There’s nothing like an unexpected trip to the ER to remind us of the importance of our health. There’s nothing like a harsh winter storm to remind us of the comfort of a well-built home. There’s nothing like a bitter election season to remind us of the importance of finding ways to walk together, especially when we don’t always agree.

Psalm 139 seems fitting for the isolation of our December world. “Lord, you have searched me and known me,” says the psalmist. “You know me when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path...and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Oh, such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

The psalmist can feel God's closeness. Hopefully there are times when we can too. And yet, depending on the situation we're in, we might not always want God to be too close. Think of the prophet Jonah running away from God's assignment to go to Nineveh, the archenemy of Israel. Think of a young woman named Mary, finding out from an angel that God wants her to have a baby. That's going to be a little hard to explain to mom and dad. No, sometimes we can have a hard time getting away from God and what God has planned for us.

The psalmist says it like this: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, [the place of the dead], you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Facing the uncertainty of life, the psalmist makes a remarkable claim: "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night; but even the darkness is not dark to you, O Lord; for the night is as bright as the day."

In Jan Karon's novel, *Those High Green Hills*, Father Tim is an Episcopal priest in the little town of Mitford. One day he experiences the darkness in a deeply personal way. In the process, he discovers some things about himself, and also about God.

It happened when Father Tim and his wife were on a camping trip. They decided to explore a nearby cave. While inside the cave, their flashlight died. They were left in utter darkness until a rescue crew found them an agonizing 14 hours later.

As you might imagine, their emotions ran the gamut from fear to outright panic. For hours they tried to "feel" their way out of the cave, but to no avail. They kept coming up on dead-ends. Finally, overcome with exhaustion, they collapsed in a heap. Though they were afraid to say it out loud, they had a gnawing sense that they might never find the way out.

While sitting in the dark, Father Tim started blaming himself. He should have known better than to start off on such a foolish adventure. He should have told someone where they were going. If nothing else, he should have checked the batteries.

The story goes on: “Father Tim had spent nearly forty years telling other people how to live in the light, and here he was, lost in a complex maze in the bowels of the earth, in total, devastating darkness. ‘I can’t get it right,’ he started to say. And again, ‘I can’t get it right. I can’t ever get it right.’

“There in the darkness he began to weep. So much of his life had involved trying to get it right—with his father, his wife, his superiors, his parish. But he always seemed to come up short. Just then his wife said something particularly poignant: ‘Trying to get everything just right is a dangerous thing, Timothy, and God does not like it. Getting it absolutely right is God’s job.’

“They were quiet for a long time. Maybe it was minutes. Maybe it was hours. There was no way to tell. After a while, Father Tim noticed that the feeling of panic had slowly subsided. In its place had come an odd and surprising peace. Somehow he wasn’t afraid anymore. He could wait. He could pray. He could hope. Suddenly there came to him some wise words from somewhere: ‘In a dark time, the eye begins to see.’ And what Father Tim saw just then—through an act of pure grace—was this: The future was in God’s hands—and God would get it right.”

Friends, no doubt, the darkness can be overwhelming. Then again, some of God’s best work gets done in the dark. Abraham and Sarah, who are childless, receive a nighttime promise from a stranger that they will have as many descendants as the stars in the sky. Jacob wrestles with an angel by a river all night long; he survives the match with a limp and a blessing and a new name – Israel. Joseph dreams vivid dreams at night, and so catches the attention of Pharaoh. And there are more besides: the exodus from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea; mana falling from heaven – all happening at night.

Maybe John Kinney’s granddaughter was onto something. *Maybe some things you just can’t see until it gets dark.* And so we begin the season of Advent. It’s a season of waiting and longing, a season of darkness. Many of us have been there: a painful illness, a broken relationship, a heartbreaking loss. Some of us are stuck with a nagging temptation, a chronic addiction, a deep and painful secret. Like Father Tim and his wife, maybe you’ve even felt as if there was no way out.

Friends, if this rings true for you, why not pray this prayer: “God, you know me. You know I don’t always get it right. Yet I trust there is nowhere I can go where you will not be. No matter how painful my past, no matter how anxious

my present, you will be there. There is no place so dark that you cannot find me. There is no mistake so grievous that you cannot forgive me. There is no loss so painful that you cannot heal me. The truly enlightening thing is that often I cannot see this until it gets dark.

**“Lord, I am grateful, so very grateful, that the *darkness is not dark to you; and the night is as bright as the day.*” Amen.**