

Hope in the Darkness
Job 11:13-19; Romans 8:19-25

The series on “This Present Darkness” was originally scheduled to wrap up next Sunday, and Joe had generously agreed to provide the meditation at that time. With the decision to invite Gary and Lydia to come next weekend to mark their official end of involvement with MFM, today’s message will, then, be the final meditation in the series.

I’ve decided to use the occasion to try to get to the heart of what it was that we were trying to do with this series; to try to home in on what it is that keeps us going; what makes us search for light in the darkness.

On one level, that may seem like a no-brainer.

Why do we search for light in the darkness? ... uh, duh ... Because it’s dark ... ??

We look for something to help us move safely through an environment that is obscure at best; an environment that holds potentially hidden dangers; an environment that can sometimes be frightening, when it’s not outright terrifying.

And yet, the light doesn’t change what’s there in the dark. Turning on a light doesn’t remove the obstacle in our path – it simply lets us see what’s there, so that we can deal with it.

But, of course, this series hasn’t been about literal darkness of the visual kind. It’s been about darkness of the spiritual kind; darkness of the soul; darkness of the heart. It’s been about that part of the human condition that pits our aspirations against the sometimes harsh reality of our world. It’s been about faith that things *can* be better; that light *is* available.

And it’s been about how not to lose hope.

I grant you – my own contributions to the series may have been more depressing than uplifting. I’m much better at asking questions than I am at providing answers. If I’ve simply brought some of you down, I apologise.

But, I don’t find it particularly helpful to idealize reality. I don’t embrace a blindly optimistic outlook that seeks to reassure itself that all will be well if we just

squeeze our eyes shut and earnestly desire a good outcome. In fact, squeezing our eyes shut simply plunges us back into darkness.

My inherent melancholy aside ... are you sick of hearing that yet?? When, oh when, is he going to drop that? We get it already! ... my inherent melancholy aside, I firmly believe that real progress in life can only be made when we recognize what the challenges are, and engage with them in the real world. We need to find real answers to real questions.

One of the risks, of course, is that the real questions can sometimes seem overwhelming. There is no shortage of depressing news on TV or elsewhere ... climate change; wars; economic collapse; natural disasters; endemic situations of injustice; fear; etc. etc. etc.

And that's just in the world "out there". In our own lives; in the privacy of our own personal losses or defeats; in the many ways that we can feel beset, or lost, or simply alone; we can sometimes feel that it's just too much to bear.

The problems can seem insurmountable.

The obstacles in front of us can seem impossibly high.

The darkness can seem impenetrable.

And so, we look for light in an otherwise dark time.

We look for signs of hope.

Hope.

It's one of those words that we bandy about fairly casually, and use in contexts that range from the mundane to the essential –

we hope that the weather will be nice;

we hope we'll do well on an exam;

we hope we'll get home in time to watch Coronation Street;

we hope we'll get a good job;

we hope our kids will turn out alright;

we hope the NDP, or the Liberals, or the Greens, or the Conservatives, will win the next election (... and just in case anyone wants to read anything into the order in which I listed those parties, please note that they were simply listed in reverse alphabetical order ... nothing more ...);

we hope we'll live long enough to retire ...

We hope.

Sometimes, though, the darkness *doesn't* seem frightening. Sometimes it just envelopes us and shuts out the myriad distractions of the day. Sometimes, when we're in turmoil, or in great distress of spirit, the darkness can almost seem like a friend. When we can't move forward because of the darkness, it lets us rest.

At times like that, we may not even be looking for light or hope – what we're looking for is shelter; a space where we can recover, or rebuild. We're looking for a quiet nook where the world won't intrude and bother us.

At a time like that we're probably not interested in someone bringing us light – certainly not the harsh glare of a floodlight. If we welcome any light at all, it is more likely to be a gentle, flickering candle than a powerful spotlight. We look for something that will help ease the pain, not something that will magnify it.

When I was preparing this meditation and trying to decide how to focus on the Light in the Darkness (... and I was determined to bring light this time ...), I considered elaborating on a list of those things that *I* look to as signs of light; a list of specific incidents, programmes, people, movements, examples of hopeful engagement.

And then it hit me that what all of the examples that I had in mind had in common is the hope of those who are involved. Hope that their work will ultimately bear fruit, even if there is no immediate return. Hope that their actions matter, even if things aren't changing as quickly as they would like. Hope that things can be made better, even if there is resistance. Hope that there is, in fact, hope.

In the passage that was read from Romans, Paul says that "...hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience ..."

I suppose it's a bit of a cliché to point that out – that we only hope for things we don't yet have. Paul is, of course, talking about our hope of a new life to come. He inserts it into a passage in which he says that even creation is groaning for something better; something finer. In the verses following those that were read, he says that even "... the [Holy] Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words ..."

I've always liked this image of the Spirit interceding with sighs too deep for words. It suggests a profound sense of yearning after things that can't easily be expressed; things that are too intimate, or too heavy, to try to put into words.

And that strikes me as a profoundly human and sensitive take on the darkness that sometimes besets us.

But it also suggests that God is there, in this present darkness, sighing along with us as we seek relief.

I've said before that I'm not much of a mystic. I have a side to me that is in touch with the spiritual; that is very much aware of the presence of God; but I don't seek, or particularly need, an ecstatic experience of God.

What I *do* seek, and need, is a sense that I am on the right path; that God is leading me; and that the light I think I can see dimly in the distance is, in fact, the light of truth.

And what I also seek, and need, is a sense that I am not on this path alone; that there are others who seem to be able make out the same light that I'm following.

One of the verses of one of the hymns we just sang reads like this :

"I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey;
But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side.
And with all of the family you saved by your love,
We'll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey."

When *I* listen for the sound of God's steps by my side, I don't expect to hear ghostly footfalls, I expect to hear the footsteps of those created in God's image who are on the same journey as me.

And *that* is where *I* find hope in the darkness,

- in the people who are struggling alongside me to make sense of it all;
- in the people who believe that their work will ultimately bear fruit, even if there is no immediate return;
- in the people who believe that their actions matter, even if things aren't changing as quickly as they would like;
- in the people who have the courage to believe that things can be made better, even if there is resistance;
- in the people who have the faith to hope that there is, in fact, hope in the darkness.

Thank you, members of Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal, for being there in the darkness with me.