

“Torah, Temple & Scroll”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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A little over a year ago, Roger Owens and Tony Robinson wrote a provocative article for the Christian Century Magazine, and it was called “The Dark Night of the Church: Re-Learning the Essentials”. It was a theological and historical reflection upon churches that go through a hard time. It was an article, not just about churches but about the church, and after citing a number of studies that validate the truth, that the church is really in decline (as if we needed more statistical proof), Owens and Robinson wrote this: “Loss of membership, congregational conflict, absence of young adults, financial crises—these are phrases from a lexicon of decline. They provide a sobering, but honest, narrative, but while they reveal some things, they hide others.”.

Saint John of the Cross was a 16th century poet and Roman Catholic mystic from Spain, and he is most famous for his poem called “The Dark Night of the Soul”. It narrates the journey of the human soul from its bodily home to its final union with God. The journey is called “The Dark Night” because darkness represents the hardships and difficulties that the soul experiences in its efforts to detach from the world and find a holy union with the Creator. It is, simply stated, a poem about the spiritual journey and about the spiritual maturity that we all seek in our union with God.

In mainstream Christian thought, “The Dark Night of the Soul” simply refers to a moment, or a series of moments, when we find ourselves in a spiritual crisis. Indeed, spiritual crises happen to everyone at some point or another.

It was not that long ago that we heard stories about Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who, according to her own letters, was in a “Dark Night of the Soul” for perhaps 50 years, valiantly serving the poorest of the poor in India, yet, all the while, quietly wondering “Where is God?”.

In the article by Owens and Robinson, they suggested that the decline of the church in the western civilization is about a “Dark Night of the Soul” for the church, and they asked this question: “Is God, in this “Dark Night”, at work wrenching our alluring memories of social prominence and the good old days inviting us to let go of those days and their memories and inviting us to re-embrace our fundamental union with God and God’s church for the promise of a bright future?”.

Put another way, the question is: From what sources does the church generate its sense of self understanding? Why does the church come together? What does the church do when it gathers? What is the purpose of its existence, and around what does the church organize itself? Those are the questions of “The Dark Night”.

Now, in our scripture selections this morning, we get a glimpse into the ways in which ancient Israel understood itself, understood its call, and understood the ways in which it would be convened and mobilized on behalf of God. It is important to understand that this understanding, call and mobilization were always carried out in a rich variety of ways as Israel responded to their historical circumstances. Historical change is always a constant, so Israel was always changing.

Generally speaking, in the Old Testament, there were three primary social and historical eras in which Israel was struggling to live out its covenant with God. The first era, the pre-state era, before Israel was a formally recognized nation, includes the period from Moses to King David. This was the time when the Israelites were organized into tribes.

Scholars tell us that these 12 tribes operated with a great deal of autonomy and that they operated sometimes in cooperation with other tribes and sometimes in great conflict with other tribes. This era was defined by an agrarian economy, and the social vision was communal with hints of an egalitarian ethic. There were hints that these tribes were trying to live out an existence of complete equality. These Hebrews were a mixed crowd. These Hebrews who made up these tribes were not one ethnicity but were generally understood to be people who lived precariously on the economic margins of society. They were freed slaves and others who were shaped and defined by their commitment to Torah, to God's Law, and they pledged their lives to a new social and religious ethic based in God's Torah. This Torah, these 613 commandments, as they are in total, promised blessing and well being while demanding lives of holiness and righteousness towards the neighbor.

In Exodus 19:4 we have God saying to the newly freed Hebrews: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice, if you hear my Law, and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. This would be a covenantal community based on Torah, but then something happened.

As we heard from I Samuel 8, which Susie read, these tribal people began to dream about having a king, and they asked for a king. They wanted to be like the other nations, so we start to walk into this second era in Israel's life which would be the period of The Monarchy. Now, this second era would be from King David in 1000 BCE to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587. This was an era of perhaps a little over 400 years.

This was an era that included a total of 41 kings, including King Zimri (who most of you have never heard of, and who I had never heard of until just the other day) who lasted 7 days in office. In this era, it was symbolized as a time when there was an immense shift in Israel's life and self understanding. They had a king now, and they were going to be in the world. They were going to be like other nations and, as they became like the other nations, they had this King Solomon, who many of us, of course, have heard of. King Solomon was King David's son and, under King Solomon, Israel began to accumulate wealth. With this wealth under King Solomon came a new social stratification and a new division of labor. With this wealth came increased taxes. With this wealth came an expanding military. Now, King Solomon was dealing in chariots, horses and weapons. There was a reintroduction of forced labor. There was the confiscation of lands, and there was a growing and resentful underclass of peasants during this era.

The shift that is important for us to think about is that, during this era, Israel's sense of self was no longer grounded in Torah, in God's Word, God's Law, but now it was grounded in the symbolic power of the Temple where God would live.

In I Kings 8, in the dedication of the Temple, we hear this from Solomon. Solomon said "The Lord has said He would dwell in thick darkness (That is a reference to Sinai, Mount Sinai), but I have built You an exalted house and a place for You to dwell in forever." Solomon is talking about the change. We are not going to listen so much anymore to the God of Sinai and all the commandments that were given to create this alternative community, but now we're going to start celebrating this God who lives in a house, who lives in a Temple.

Listen how Solomon built this Temple. From I Kings 7, it says "So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the Lord, the golden altar, the golden table for the bread of the presence, the lamp stands of pure gold, five on the south side, five on the north side, in front of the inner sanctuary, the flowers, the lamps and the tongs of gold, the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense and frying pans of pure gold, the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the Temple of pure gold. I thought I should read that to you so you would hear it once in your lifetime.

This is all about "bling". This is about gold. This is about a Temple that is dripping with gold because this is

where God now lives and where God is kept under control. Solomon, who was married to Pharaoh's daughter, would sit down with Pharaoh and say, tell me how you organized this big nation state. They would have conversations over dinner about how to do this and Solomon was good at it but, of course, the transition from Torah, this alternative community based on God's new Law, the transition from Torah to a Temple-based theocracy, wouldn't last and, like all great empires, it fell, so in 587 The Monarchy falls at the hands of Babylon, and Israel would now have to figure out how to live without the institutional power of kingship, and without the ideological certainty of the Temple. Their Temple is gone, their city is gone, their kings are wiped out. Who are we now? What they discovered, both through desperation and a longing, was a reconnection with God's Torah through this new tradition of written scrolls. This reorganization became what we now know as Judaism. It was based on an intense recommitment to Torah with its radial social ethic and its holiness. When Judaism reconvened after the Babylonian exile, they had to do it in a way that they could preserve themselves so that holiness, being separate from that which defiles, was very important in that moment of their lives. So they became, once again, a community of practice and discipline. They were no longer a political power. They were no longer a super power among the nations. All they had left was God's Word.

If you picked up in that reading from Nehemiah 8 when the priest, Ezra reads the Torah to the community, they cry. They weep after the reading of that scroll. What happened there was that they cried because they were being reconnected with the source of their identity. They were being reconnected with the source of their call, being reconnected with their history and their lives. They were being reconnected with their God, and they were finding hope again for their lives.

So, "The Dark Night of the Church", like "The Dark Night of the Soul", is a difficult and painful place to be, but it is also, if one can stay still in the darkness, if one can enter into dialogue with pain, if one can remain open to what the darkness has to teach, "The Dark Night" can be a place of great learning and great opportunity, but our temptation, in both our personal lives and in our church's, is always to move quickly through the pain and get to the healing, to sweep the darkness under the carpet, to pretend that "The Dark Night" never really happened, but what our scripture tells us, and what our lives tell us if we are honest, is that newness comes into our lives through struggle. Newness comes into our lives when we look in the mirror at ourselves and we take an account, and we get honest with our struggles, and we confess the places we've been and the people we have hurt, and the things that we have let go. That is the story of ancient Israel. As a broad narrative, it is about getting caught up in the world, getting caught up in being a worldly power, forgetting about Torah until all hell breaks loose and their faith is gone and they start to build it up again, getting out those old scrolls, reading them again, reminding themselves, oh yes, this is our narrative. This is our story.

When we think about the story of Jesus, we remember that, in that early story of His life, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days. It is in the wilderness time that Jesus confronted his demons. It is where he encountered and engaged "The Dark Night" of the soul and where he learned and got prepared for His life and His ministry as God's son.

So, the church, too, must face its demons. The church, too, must learn from "The Dark Night". The church, too, like ancient Israel before must ground its life again in God's Word and in God's promise and, if the church can do that, if God's people can be honest with themselves and with their God and with one another about where they have been and what went wrong on the journey, then healing will come. New understandings will arise, and a new future filled with promise and a renewed sense of God's call will emerge.

In the United Church of Christ, we believe that God is still speaking, and in that still speaking, God is calling us to listen. We give thanks to God for newness. We give thanks to God for "The Dark Nights" and for the wisdom that we learn through our struggles. We give thanks to God for the promise of resurrection through Jesus Christ. Amen.