

Jamestown Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2021

Pastor Sue Nageotte

“Out of the Darkness; Out of the Deep”

Matthew 3: 1-3, 13-17 & Genesis 1:1-5

NOTE for the worship service: I am going to read both passages (from Matthew and Genesis) before the children's message.

[sermon begins:] *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”* The opening words of Scripture are so familiar that we do not stop to ask a very important question. “Where were the people of God, when these words were first written down?”

Obviously, they were not present when God said “Let there be light.” Ancient tradition says that the first five books of the Bible were written down by Moses. That means that God's people must have been somewhere between the banks of the Nile and the banks of the River Jordan. Somewhere between a life of hard labor as slaves in Egypt, and a long-dreamed-of (but not yet realized) life of freedom in the land that God had promised to Abraham and his descendants.

God's people were, therefore, in a place that was also “formless and void” – a place of hardship and desert ... a time of possibilities ... but a time when the life they had known was gone, and what they would BECOME was not yet certain.

And it is in this “formless void” -- between Egypt and the promised land – the Spirit moves Moses to write down the story of God's creative work at the very dawn of time. It is not intended to be a historical account, or a scientific proposition about creation. Rather, these first verses in Genesis give us a framework in which we may begin – just begin! – to see God's character and sovereign power. Here, we find a foundation for hope even when situations in our life are tumultuous, dark and chaotic.

First, Genesis tells us *“In the beginning, God ...”* There was never a time before God, or a time without God. And the Spirit of God was there, hovering over the surface of “the deep.” The word “hovering” is of a bird with wings outstretched, protectively. Some translations say “brooding,” like a hen keeping a nest warm under her feathers. It was a formless void, yes, but one being watched over, protected and nurtured by God.

Next, Genesis tells us that God creates by *speaking*. He spoke, and that which had been dark was illuminated. The void was, first, filled with light. In verses we will not read this morning, God continues to speak in a cascade of creative actions to establish and fill the sea and the dry land, the sky and the heavens above. Everything that exists came into being through God; everything that exists *depends* upon God. There is no prior authority, no greater power.

Genesis also tells us that God creates by *separating*. God began by separating the light from the darkness. These verses are not talking about the darkness of sin, but rather the regular cycle “day” from “night.” As I said during the children’s message, “night” is one of God’s gifts to us, so that we can sleep and rest.

But “darkness” CAN have other meanings, and it is appropriate to briefly consider them here. One meaning, is that of trouble, uncertainty, hardship, danger. We talk about “dark times” in life -- a dark day in Washington last week -- dark weeks ahead as our world continues to suffer from the pandemic.

Catherine Marshall told about her friend, Marge, who boarded a plane bound for Cleveland. As they sat on the runway, waiting for takeoff at dusk, she noticed a strange phenomenon. Looking across the aisle, she could see through the distant windows a beautiful sunset that lit up the sky in wonderful orange and red colors—on that side of the plane. But, looking through the window beside her, she could see only darkness.

As she reflected on that, she heard a voice from within. The voice said:

“You have looked out through the windows on each side of the plane.

Your life, too, will contain happy, beautiful times, but will also contain dark shadows.

Here is a lesson I want to teach you to save you much heartache
and to allow you to “abide in Me” with continual peace and joy.

You see, it doesn’t matter which window you look through;

this plane is still going to Cleveland.

So it is with your life. You have a choice. You can dwell on the gloomy picture.

Or you can focus on the bright things and leave the dark, ominous situations to Me.

I alone can handle them anyway.

And the final destination is not influenced by what you see along the way.”

Try to remember that story, and recall it when your life seems dark and cloudy. God can handle all the dark, ominous situations and bring you at last to a safe destination.

But let's clearly understand a few things. If you want to fly to a distant city, you have to get on a plane that will take you there. If you want to go through life with less stress and anxiety, by all means, "focus on the bright things." But if your ultimate goal is heaven, there is only one way to get there -- and that is by accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

The inner voice that spoke to Marge used the image of darkness to describe the troubling things we see through our window on life – things that can rob us of our peace and joy. It's an important message – that we should focus on the beauty and blessings God has placed into our lives, and keep our minds from dwelling on the "darkness" of things we can't do anything about.

But the reality is, there's a deeper kind of darkness. The Bible uses the word "darkness" to describe our spiritual condition when we are still lost in sin. The Bible also plainly says there are powers in the world that oppose God – "powers of darkness." We cannot escape from that darkness by "looking on the bright side."

Friends, this is the good news. Jesus Christ came to save sinners – sinners like me, sinners like you. He came to lift us out of the dominion of darkness, out of the depths of sin and despair, so that we might live and love and serve in holy freedom – in his light, now and forevermore.

Amen? Amen.

(transition to the Lord's Supper)