

Night Light

Maundy Thursday

"The Light of the World," by Jean Pasquet

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I knew immediately when Mr. Bryson showed me the choral piece being performed this evening, "The Light of the World," what the theme of the meditation would be. That is a rare experience, but it came to me immediately that it should be "Night Light," and I thought of this profound statement with which the lesson ended, "It was night."

John's gospel plays on the duality of light and darkness. You can find it throughout; you heard it in the readings this evening. Light and darkness. Jesus, the Light of the world, and the darkness that continues to threaten the light. In the prologue to the gospel in that first paragraph, John speaks about the light that has come into the world and he says in words that we use so often here, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

John not only played with the themes of light and darkness, but he loved to use words that could be interpreted in more than one fashion. In the translation that I read, that the darkness will not overcome the light, there is a decision made to interpret the Greek word behind it in one way, that is, that the darkness will never finally be able to crush out the light. But, the Greek word actually could also be rendered, "the darkness will never comprehend the light." There are good exegetical reasons for translating it either way, and knowledge of the Greek language would not indicate which way it should be translated. There are possible parallels throughout the gospel to either understanding. Did John mean that the darkness never got it, never understood it, never comprehended what the light was all about that had dawned in the world? Or, did he mean to affirm, as I read it a moment ago, that the darkness, though ever threatening, would never be successful in snuffing out the light?

Edgar Goodspeed has a modern translation in which he tried to bridge that duality of meaning. He used the word mastered. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never mastered the light, never mastered it in the sense of comprehending it, or mastered it in the sense of overcoming it. Or another possibility - the darkness never absorbed the light, never absorbed it in terms of

taking it in, comprehending, or absorbed in terms of swallowing it up. John loves to play with us that way and leave us thinking about it. In any case, I think an argument could be made for both meanings. On the one hand, it seems as though, although the light has come into the world, the world doesn't get it. Indeed, to what extent do we get it? Or, did we get it so clearly that it scared us and we made it into something else?

It is true that human history is a long tale of darkness. There is darkness enough, it seems, at every age and every generation. When Jesus gathered with his disciples on that last night, he gave them an example of that servanthood which was the hallmark of his life with them, he washed their feet. And then, beginning to feel the pressure of the crush, his soul in anguish, he came out with it, "One of you will betray me." And even then, he extended bread to Judas. But, finally he dismissed Judas and, perhaps seeing no change of demeanor, he said, "What you have to do, do quickly." And Judas went out, and it was night. The night of the world.

That was not the first time the world knew darkness, nor the last. I have in my hands this little account of the Holocaust by Elie Wiesel. It's entitled simply, "Night." If you've never read it, perhaps, for your Holy Week meditation, it would be a profitable reading if you want to understand the darkness. In the prison camp in which Elie Wiesel as a young boy was incarcerated with his father, he tells of an incident when, coming back from the work detail, the prisoners saw that the gallows had three ropes ready, and there were two men and a child. A child had been tortured for a number of weeks in order to force him to reveal the names of those that might have been engaged in some revolt against the camp authority. The child would not mention one name and was therefore condemned to die. And so, as the custom was, the whole camp of prisoners was lined up in front of the gallows and the two men and the child in the middle. The three necks were placed at the same moment into nooses.

"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

"Cover your heads!"

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive, their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed.

Behind me I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer him:
"Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows..."

That night the soup tasted like corpses.

And it was night.

As I got ready to come this evening and walked to and fro past the evening news on television, it seemed that every time I walked past, there was an unending column of humankind, men, women, children, older people, some being wheeled in wheelbarrows, their faces heavy with the anguish of the experience, the hell through which they're going. And it is night, still night. Because we still haven't comprehended it. We still don't get it.

I hope John meant, and I want to believe, the other nuance of that word, as well, that finally, finally the light will not be overcome. Some of us last evening joined the Jewish community in the celebration of Passover and in our program there was a toast to freedom written by Leonard Fein of the Shalom Hartman Institute. Its reference is to the Passover Feast in the Jewish context, but as I read it, I couldn't help but think of tonight.

Each cup we raise this night is an act of memory and of reverence. The story we tell this year, as every year, is not yet done. It begins with them, then; it continues with us, now. We remember not out of curiosity or nostalgia, but because it is our turn to add to the story.

Our challenge this year, as every year, is to feel the Exodus, to open the gates of time and become one with those who crossed the Red Sea from slavery to freedom.

Our challenge this year, as every year, is to know the Exodus, to behold all those in every land who have yet to make the crossing.

Our challenge this day, as every day, is to reach out our hands to them and to help them cross to freedomland.

We know some things that others do not always know - how arduous is the struggle, how very deep the waters to be crossed and how treacherous their tides, how filled with irony and contradiction and suffering are the crossing and then the wandering.

We know such things because we ourselves wandered in the desert for forty years. Have not those forty years been followed by thirty-two centuries of struggle and of quest? Heirs to those who struggled and quested, we are old-timers at disappointment, veterans at sorrow, but always, always prisoners of hope. The hope is the anthem of our people (*Hatikvah*), and the way of our people.

For all the reversals and all of the stumbling-blocks, for all the blood and all the hurt, hope still dances within us. That is who we are, and that is what this Seder is about. [And that is what this table is about.] For the slaves do become free, and the tyrants are destroyed. Once, it was by miracles; today, it is by defiance and devotion. [For us, to the way of Jesus.]

From the book, *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah*.

For it is still night.
But, he is our Night Light.

Reference:

Noam Zion and David Dishon. *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah*. Shalom Hartman Institute, publishers, 1997.

Elie Wiesel. *Night*. Hill and Wang, revised edition, 2006.