

“The Dark Spot”

- “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” ... “Will these hands ne’er be clean?”¹
 - It was my 11th grade year in high school, and I was sitting in AP English class... behind Katy
 - As you might guess, I do not remember much else from this class.
 - In spite of the class supposedly being “advanced”, we did not do much- it was a goof off class
 - But I do remember this: reading a portion of Shakespeare’s MacBeth, I think we even acted a little of it out
 - And I remember this scene above all others some twenty years later
 - I imagine Lady MacBeth, when awake convincing herself that the murder they committed was worth it, was ok,
 - That the end justified the means, and it was somehow all going to turn out just fine, with MacBeth on the throne unchallenged.
 - That was when she was awake- she was MacBeth’s strength when his own courage almost failed him
 - However, the story was different when she was asleep
 - As most of you know, I am sure having read this famous piece of classical literature yourself
 - While sleep walking, Lady MacBeth was dreaming she had blood on her hands, and no matter how she washed them they did not come clean
 - Ultimately bringing about her self-inflicted demise.
 - The blood, the guilt, the dark spot that just would not come clean.
 - All of this sort of swirled together in my head this week as we began our Lent together just a few days ago on Ash Wednesday
 - In addition to our liturgical season of focus on sin and repentance, we also heard on Wednesday of yet one more tragic school shooting
 - Where 17 were killed at the hands of another teenager
 - It made me think of my own high school experience, of blow-off English classes, young crushes, and the occasional bully

¹ http://nfs.sparknotes.com/macbeth/page_180.html

- But no guns, no fear of death- there was a lot going on this week
- Ashes and dust, dark spots and helplessness, sin and evil
- With all of this going on, it seems only fitting for us to use today, Lent 1, to talk about it.
- But not just that- we also get to talk about the hope that we have even when things are at their darkest.
- Our readings help immensely today, as the first one is from Genesis and is the conclusion the flood story
 - God had flooded the earth because of all of the sin in human's hearts, the spot that needed cleaning
 - Right before the rain began, he had told Noah, one of the only righteous and faithful people alive at the time, to build an ark
 - He and his family boarded the ark, with many animals two by two, and were there for forty days and nights
 - While the rains came down and the floods came up!
 - Once the waters receded, God decides to make a promise to Noah that God would never again destroy humankind with a flood
 - The rainbow was God's sign, God's reminder, of this promise and that when it rained and the bow appeared in the sky
 - Everyone was reminded of God's promise, including God, that this was not going to flood the entire world again, no matter how bad the storm
 - But even after the flood, after the great washing, the spot remained- God's great flood did not wash it out. ²
 - This growing dark spot of sin and disobedience has plagued us for a long time
 - It began all the way back in Genesis with Adam and Eve and their disobedience
 - The Great Fall
 - And after the flood, it was quickly apparent that sin, evil, and the dark spot would not be easily wash out
 - Now historically, we are unsure that a single flood wiped out all but one family on earth.
 - We do know that many cultures have a flood story, leading scholars to think that there was a really terrible flood at one point and it stuck in our collective memories
 - Perhaps it even decimated most of the population of the nearby world

² Soards, Marion, ed. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Lent 1, p. 19

- But instead of focusing on the historical accuracy of such a Biblical event, take a look at how the Israelites used the story to tell us about God
- God, ever persistence, trying many things including a flood, all to fix what has gone wrong
- All to get us back in relationship to our creator
- I imagine God shaking his head and wondering what to do next.
- How not to punish, or kill unnecessarily, but how to take this thing, this sin, away for our own benefit, permanently
- Now there's been a lot of thought over the Christian centuries about this dark spot of sin
 - Of our tendency to repeat those same decisions Adam and Eve made in the garden
 - To continue to lose sight of God, and of how to treat each other
 - St. Paul- who only narrowly lost out to St. Peter in the Lent Madness competition last week
 - Paul speaks of sin as entering the world through Adam, and becoming a part of our nature from generation to generation
 - We are fallen, and have taken creation with us
 - Later, St. Augustine would conclude that this original sin is still with us and we have a sin nature
 - We are born with it- it is inseparable from our humanness
 - That we can and often do make choices and commit actions that hurt ourselves, others, creation, and God
 - I often think of it as our ability, or even tendency to not only do incredible good with the free will and abilities we have
 - But also our ability do incredible harm with it
 - And even more- perhaps we are tempted to do harm a lot more than we are tempted to do good
 - To put ourselves above all other things- above God, above the people we know, above the people we do not know
 - And to naturally defend whatever power and wealth we have at almost any cost
 - Basically, we will put anything and everything above God in our lives and that causes us many problems.
 - But whether you agree with Augustine, or have your own thoughts about our tendency to hurt ourselves and each other

- Whether we are born with it or quickly learn it, one cannot deny the presence of sin and evil
- Anytime I think about evil, or original sin, I think about the musical Wicked- have you seen it?
 - Simply fantastic, and quite the commentary on evil and especially how an evil person comes about
 - We are talking about Elphaba, the wicked witch of the west, the green faced evil person who chases Dorothy through Oz
 - And in the opening musical number, everyone is singing, “No one mourns the Wicked”, and we know who they are talking about
 - And then the good witch says, “Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?”
 - And, “from the moment she was born, she was...” (there’s a pause), “well, different”
 - Different as in Green
 - And the foreshadowing line in the same song, “so you see, it couldn’t have been easy.”
 - Couldn’t have been easy to be born so different...
 - Over the next couple of scenes and musical numbers, she’s an outcast, few real friends, she is hated for speaking the truth about the wizard
 - And then she is scapegoated by power protecting itself.
 - By the end, she sings her song, “No Good deed goes unpunished” as she promises to do no good deed again.
 - Is evil something we are born with? Or is it created? Or both?
 - Nature, or nurture
 - I imagine the answer is some of both.
- Either way, it is still here. The spot that God could no wash out with the flood
 - And you can see its evidence again this past week
 - Not only the one person’s sin of killing, but of our collective sin of being a part of a society that helped shape him into that
 - I feel helpless about it, truly, even out of words for it.
 - What more can be said, after at least a dozen examples of gun violence at schools in 2018 alone? ³
 - My heart helplessly breaks, I lament it. I repent of it.
 - That’s what Lent is for, right? to repent, to change directions, u-Turn

³ <https://www.snopes.com/2018/02/16/how-many-school-shootings-in-2018/>

- I repent of my part of being in a democratic society, which is governed by the people I help put into office
- That has created a situation where teenagers decide shooting their peers is the best way forward- that there are no better alternatives
- Of creating a society that raises kids to be teens who even want to kill others- and we offer them no help, they slip through the cracks
- Of creating a society where as the traditional support structures diminish- that is churches, families, civic groups, and communities
- People are left on their own, alone,
- And if a person is prone to mental illness, little loving care that might tip the scale in the healing direction, but it's not there.
- And as this all happens, access to weapons that can kill on massive scales increases
- It's a perfect storm.
- This is certainly a dark spot of our time, and if left me in a dark place
- Now when a preacher gets to this place during the week while preparing a sermon, where it is heavy and there is much to be said
 - There's a responsibility, I think, to articulate it.
 - For if I am thinking it and feeling it, perhaps you are too
 - And then there's one other piece that a preacher must do:
 - And that is to remind us all that it is not hopeless
 - And that God is still working to remove that spot. To repair the stain on creation
 - The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!
 - That's foreshadowing to the Easter Vigil!!
 - It is coming!
 - Not to get ahead of ourselves here, but it is when things are darkest that we need the light the most
 - And the light shines the brightest.
 - And it starts right here in this passage from Mark- Jesus begins his ministry of preaching repentance ⁴
 - God did not give up after the flood, God changed tactics⁵
 - Instead of flooding the world, now God has joined it in the flesh
 - In our Gospel passage, Jesus is baptized by John, and driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit

⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent1b>

⁵ Soards, Marion, ed. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Lent 1, p. 20

- He was tempted, his nature and nurture tested. What kind of person will Jesus be?
- Jesus returns after forty days in the wilderness, recalling the length of the flood we just talked about
 - A time of purification
- And he returns upon hearing the news that John the Baptist is dead-beheaded for sport
- And in the darkest of times following the murder of his cousin, Jesus shows us who is really is
- He calls us to repent
- And he reminds us that the Kingdom of God is near
- Repentance, hope, and Good News
- God's ongoing desire and attempt to repair creation is still going!
- But instead of huge acts of flooding the world, or of trying to remove it forcefully
- God is now moved the fight into our own hearts and lives- we are on the forefront of God's redeeming work, of God's cleansing work
- Because God has not given up on us and on creation- in fact God is committed for the long haul
- And we have our part to play, and Lent 1 seems the perfect day:
- Repent. And believe the good news. And Love God, love your neighbor, keep the priorities in the right places
- Wash out the dark spot from within
- None of this is easy, none of this has quick fix answers
 - God learned that lesson when God tried to fix it with a flood- it did not work
 - Yet this is the work we are called to do, the opportunity for our Lenten journey
 - To walk with God and be a part of the transformation of this world into the Kingdom of God
 - For it is near! It is possible.
 - And the good news is that God is right there with us
 - Mourning when the darkness seems to overtake us
 - Yet refusing to allow that darkness to extinguish the light.
 - "Create in us a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within us."

Amen.