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Into the Darkness

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The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers is an Episcopal priest serving as the Canon for Evangelism, Reconciliation, and Stewardship of Creation for the Episcopal Church. Her work in the church takes her all over the country and allows her to meet people from many different walks of life. She recently wrote about a man named Josh who reached out to her and asked for her help. Josh is a twenty-something who works for a Washington DC think-tank, one of those groups of exceptionally intelligent people who have answers for problems. When he called the Rev. Stephanie he told her about a serious problem at his workplace. He told her there were people he worked with and called friends who are conservative and progressive, people of faith and no faith, and after this year's election something in his think tank relationships broke. He reported people no longer seemed to trust each other, had seemed to have forgotten how to talk to each other, and weren't even looking at each other.

Now Josh hadn't been to church or even uttered a prayer in a very long time, but when everything else that he and his organization had relied on fell flat, the think tank ran out of answers because they couldn't work together any longer. Instead of falling into temptations of being angry, resentful, or demonizing his colleagues, Josh reached out to an Episcopal priest and asked her to come and lead a spiritual retreat to help begin to heal the divide that had erupted in his work place, and in his life.

Stephanie wrote that Josh reminded her of something she has been too guilty of forgetting: that followers of Jesus do not run away from whatever causes darkness, things like fear, lack of trust, anger, scapegoating. Instead followers of Christ follow Christ into such darkness. For that is where the Light of Christ is needed the most.

That is the incredibly powerful and timely reminder in this morning's Gospel reading, where we heard, at long last, of Jesus beginning his ministry. A ministry Jesus did not start, we heard in Matthew's Gospel, until after John the Baptist had been arrested and imprisoned by the Roman authorities. This is an important turning point for Matthew's Gospel, because it says a great deal about what the messiah was up to and what it means to follow him.

First, did you notice what Jesus did *not* do after John the Baptist was arrested? He did not gather men to fight, he did not start training warriors, he did not storm the castle and demand John the Baptist's release. He did not start another insurrection, the kind he had grown up hearing about because those kinds of military style movements had been all too common in Jesus' day, ever since the Romans took over the region the Israelites called theirs. Yet none of those movements ever made any progress in getting Rome to retreat, even though they used methods Rome was familiar with. Instead, those movements only proved what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would say many years later, "Darkness does not drive out darkness, only light can do that."

Instead, did you notice what Jesus did do? He withdrew. Now as we continue to explore Matthew's Gospel this year, we will come across this word, *withdrew*, again. It is used often in Matthew's Gospel, and it has a special intention. While it could be seen as a tactical retreat from a potentially dangerous situation, that is not the author's intention. Instead the word *withdrew* was used whenever Jesus made a decision as to how to respond to a situation in a way that shows who he is and what he is up to. He didn't form an army and attack Rome. Instead he went to a new location, a town near a lake, a place where people from different towns came to trade and buy and sell, a place ruled by the Roman Empire and a place where Jewish people were in the minority, and the majority were Gentiles, a term for anyone who wasn't Jewish. Jesus didn't go running to the bosom of his own people for comfort and support when he heard of John the Baptist's arrest; instead he went into what could be considered "foreign or even enemy territory", to be among people who were different from him politically and spiritually. But also to a place where there was opportunity to show many different people from many different places something they didn't know was coming: the kingdom of heaven.

That is perhaps why the author of Matthew's Gospel chose to include that lovely line from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, about people in darkness seeing the light. This may not be a proof-text as much as it is a way to help us who are reading the words of this Gospel see what was happening theologically. The darkness could be fear, ignorance about God, broken relationships with God and each other, or capitulation to living the values of the empire instead of living God's way, or any combination of these. Jesus was intentionally showing he wasn't going to do what others had done because he was showing what God was up to, he was the light, and he started by proclaiming and casting the same

message John the Baptist had proclaimed by the river. A message of change, a change in direction, a call to change a person's orientation from wherever it was to orienting toward God. That is what it means to repent. If a person had totally lost a sense of direction and couldn't change on their own, that was okay, that is what Jesus came to help people do, and where his healing comes in.

We also heard Jesus didn't intend to do that work by himself. He called helpers, people who he observed using the skills he would need in a new way. That is why he called fishermen. Notice, though, what the fishermen were doing when Jesus called them. Often this part of today's Gospel is used to promote evangelism, that we all must be fishers or catchers or people. But none of the fishermen were actually catching or hauling in fish when Jesus called to them. Peter and Andrew were casting nets into the sea and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, were mending nets. These were the skills Jesus needed: casting and mending, because that is the core of his work: to cast God's light and mend or heal the ill or diseased. Another way to look at healing is a way to restore health and life.

And we heard at the end of our Gospel is that exactly what Jesus did: he taught, he proclaimed the kingdom of heaven, and he healed. This was being the light of God, and he took that light to places of darkness, because that is where the light was needed the most.

That light is still needed today, because there is still darkness, just as the Rev. Stephanie Spellers' friend Josh is living with. We hear about this darkness of mistrust, anger, resentment, even seeking revenge, and fear all the time. From people on all sides of political spectrums, in all economic situations, people of all genders, races, ages, and even religious faiths. I don't have to tell you a division fed by anger and fear is and has been growing among families, communities, and countries for years because we can see and experience it ourselves. This division can and has crept into so many aspects of our lives, in different ways for each of us, perhaps, but there is no denying its presence. Or its growth.

In the face of any darkness, division, fear, mistrust, injustice, or anger it is a common instinct to retreat from such situations in the vague hope that someone will do something to make it go away. But today's Gospel reminds us that is not what followers of Jesus are called to do. We cannot hide from the darkness, we are called to go into the darkness and bring with us not the light of consumerism or celebrity or politics, but the light Dr. King was talking about: the light of Christ. The light that proclaims God's Kingdom of healing and restoration.

To be sure, this is not easy work, and it won't always be welcomed. And it isn't work we need to do alone, not even Jesus did this work alone. That is why we have each other, everyone here at Good Shepherd this morning and other churches and those who couldn't be with us today. We have each other to share this work, to shine Christ's light and to remind each other our work is to restore and heal, to help strengthen what we have in common, to show the world people with different politics can work together, can worship together and pray together not just for each other, can serve together, can create beauty together; together can be the light of Christ.

One of the reasons I am so very proud to be your priest-in-charge here at Church of the Good Shepherd is because you are so deeply committed to being that Light of Christ, to being present in this place and this time, to reach out and show the community that Christianity, that Christ, doesn't have to look like anger or fear of the different, doesn't have to cringe at change, doesn't shut out anyone without a key to our doors. You show the community and the world that healing love of Christ as you feed all people with a warm welcome as well as food, with comforting prayer shawls, visiting prisoners, with careful choices to be environmentally just, to welcome the people for whom welcome is a rare experience, and to share what we have.

After this service, we will gather for our Annual Meeting, which is both a requirement to do the business of church, and an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate our growth, to acknowledge and face our challenges, to renew our commitment to being the Light of Christ in this place, and to carry that light into the places we go from here. Into our homes, classes and workplaces, into stores and barber shops and salons, to doctors and dentists' offices, prisons, to civic or government offices, meetings, to sidewalks and roads, neighborhoods even the social media sites we might participate in. No matter where each one of us goes from here, and what we encounter, each one of us has the opportunity to show whomever we encounter the Light of Christ. This might look different for each of us, and that is okay, because all that really matters is that we face any darkness with God's Love in Christ, and let that Love and Light begin to heal the wounds in need of healing. As we go into a new year together, one where we will enjoy new opportunities and enjoy old traditions, let's also remember our calling in both the old and new is to share Christ's healing love in the dark places of the world.