

"The Power of Darkness"
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
Palm Sunday – April 4, 2019
Philippians 2: 5-11, Luke 22: 14-23:56

"Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

They're in the Garden of Gethsemane amid the gnarled old olive trees, at night, after the Passover meal. Jesus has been praying earnestly, asking for another way. He's been given strength by an angel to continue his journey to the cross and beyond. The religious leaders are now upon him with swords and clubs as if he were a violent man. They have come in fear and in anger, afraid that this man and his teaching will cause an uprising that could endanger them all.

"This is your hour," Jesus says, "and the power of darkness." How we wish it didn't have to be so. Even the disciples don't stay awake to face that hour with him, instead falling asleep in their grief.

They don't want to think about the power of darkness having its hour, and neither do we.

We come to church seeking comfort from the Good Shepherd, longing for him to protect and care for us and to lead us beside still waters.

We come seeking the friend we have in Jesus who will walk in the garden with us and keep us free of all suffering.

We put our faith in God and try to do the right thing, assuming that if we do, we will be rewarded with the good life, the comfortable life, the carefree life.

We hope that if we just pray hard enough, if we do our duty and follow the rules, then we will receive our reward: ease, happiness, and eternal life.

We want God to fix everything that saddens us or frightens us or causes us pain.

And we certainly want God to beat back the power of darkness at this and every hour.

Of course we want that. We're human. But we expect God to come gloriously down and vanquish the powers of darkness, not considering that we might at times be contributing to them with our fear and anger and selfishness. Or our need for security and keeping the status quo. Or our denial – it's so much easier just to go back to sleep and not stay aware of the pain and suffering in this world.

And yet, we don't follow a Savior who hid from suffering or took an easy path.

We follow Jesus, who came among us to serve.

We follow Jesus, who healed the ear of the high priest's servant even while those who would torture and kill him were arresting him.

We follow Jesus, "who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." All knowing, all powerful, and he was willing to let go of all that and become one of us, inhabiting a weak human body, a body that could suffer, a body that would die.

It's so hard for us human merely beings to conceive of this emptying of our power. In Bible study on Wednesday, I shared with the group that when I hear this passage from Philippians, I can't help seeing an image of the genie in Aladdin. He's explaining to Aladdin about the limits to his power and how he has to stay in the lamp, saying, "It's all part and parcel of the whole genie gig: Phenomenal cosmic power, Itty Bitty Living Space." Not that Jesus and the genie are anything alike, mind you, but it gives a visual – phenomenal cosmic power, poured out so that Jesus could reside in a mortal, human body. Itty Bitty Living Space indeed.

That is the God we worship, the Lord we follow. Willing to be one of us and to pour himself out for us, even when we deny him, even when we betray him, even when we fall asleep, even when we argue among ourselves, even when we begin our day singing hosannas and end it shouting, "Crucify him!"

Jesus knows that we will fail, as the disciples failed before us. We will at some point give in to the power of darkness, and yet, as he says to Peter at that Passover meal, "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Jesus knows that the religious leaders and the governing authorities and the powers of darkness will have their hour, and though he prays for it to pass him by, he does not turn away but faces into it just as he has continued turning his face toward Jerusalem.

My friends, this is the beginning of Holy Week. We are in it now. We started the morning with hosannas and blessings, and now we turn our faces toward the cross. We have a choice this week. We can go back to sleep, to busyness, to distraction, to denial, and we can meet back here next Sunday, coming to the party after having turned away from Jesus and his walk to the cross. No judgment, it's not easy to watch. It's not easy to bear witness.

And yet, we can also choose to stay awake as best we can, to come together in this place, as often as we can this week, to make Jesus our priority, to sacrifice a bit of our time and energy to remember once again not only his sacrifice, but also his sacrificial love for us.

We can choose to walk with him, just as he chose to walk with us. We can choose to stand with him in his hours of darkness, just as he is always with us in ours.

If we fail, we can also choose to turn back, like Peter, and to strengthen others.

Jesus is praying for us, praying that our faith will not fail. The power of darkness may have its hour, but it does not have the final say.