

Pentecost III 1.23.11

Trinity Cathedral

Catherine Nichols

The People who sat in darkness have seen a great light...

Do any of you remember the eminent pediatrician, T. Berry Brazelton?

In the late sixties, and through the seventies and eighties

Dr. Brazelton's books on infants and toddlers

saved some of us parents, time and time again, as we consulted his books

about the wide spectrum of "normal" for infants and toddlers:

The normal calm baby who developed slowly and was remarkably patient,

perhaps not walking until fifteen months or so;

the normal moderately calm/active baby who walked at about a year

and could practice delayed gratification fairly well,

at least sometimes;

and the whirlwind baby who was walking at 9 months,

and screamed at the top of his lungs when he wanted something.

T. Berry reassured us that all were "normal."

His books were my Bibles during those challenging years

of my children's infancy and toddlerhood.

Dr. Brazelton's books supplied pediatric wisdom to my generation
as did Dr. Benjamin Spock for our parents.

I adored T. Berry Brazelton.

Dr. Brazelton lived and practiced in Cambridge.

I envied the few moms I knew who sometimes dropped comments
about their children's pediatrician,

“Well, Dr. Brazelton says such-and-such....”

Some years later when, as a tutor in a college dorm in Boston

I was responsible for a lecture series,

I got my nerve up and invited Dr. Brazelton.

To my delight he accepted!

Undergrads might not have been particularly interested

in babies and toddlers,

unless they were studying the psychology of early childhood.

But many, many of the students were pre-med.

Hearing an eminent physician speak was of great interest.

So we got a good crowd that night.

Dr. Brazelton spoke for a few minutes,
indeed commenting that “you college kids may not yet be burning
to know about treating well babies and toddlers,”
but as he talked about the challenges and joys
of practicing pediatric medicine the students were deeply engaged.
Then he took questions, and this is why I remember the occasion so vividly.

One of the other parents, another tutor in the dormitory
whose children were very young, asked,
“Can you tell us why late afternoon is ALWAYS the witching hour?

Why the kids are so cranky and difficult?”

Everyone laughed -- that witching hour is Very Real
to any parent or teacher or care-giver!

Dr. Brazelton laughed, too, a sympathetic laugh.

Then he replied,

“Well, there’s the obvious: they and you are all tired after a long day,
and you and they are hungry....”

Then he looked out at us and turned serious.

“And then of course there’s another thing.”

He paused.

“We’re all afraid of the dark.”

“We’re all afraid of the dark.”

That was his profound, religious answer.

It’s not merely the primitive people who throughout the ages have feared the dark. Many of us have an irrational fear of darkness.

I’ve been with city children who go for the first time to the country, perhaps their first time at sleep-away camp.

They have never been away from the city,
never experience true darkness.

They are afraid at night: it’s really dark in the country!
-- no streetlights, no lights at all, and lots of insect noises.

They may express their deepest fears:

a bear or a coyote might get’em.

When people from rural areas stay for the very first time in the big city

where there is lots of noise and the dark isn't very dark,
they often fear robbers,
for the city is so unknown to them.

The darkness of anything unknown is for all of us fearsome.

So the concept of the people in darkness
is a powerful one that invades us down, down to our very deep unconscious.

And sitting or walking in darkness is one of the themes
of both today's Old Testament poetry, Isaiah's prophecy,

and well as Jesus's quotation of that passage
as he begins his public ministry in the Galilee.

John The Baptizer has been thrown into prison

-- he will soon be killed

through the darkness of hatred, greed, excess, and fear.

Herod's fear of John's power

is part of the darkness that will lead to Herod's

having John beheaded.

So Jesus retreats far from Jerusalem, far from the centers of public power,
to the agricultural Galilee region.

We'll be reading the Gospel of Matthew all year,
and you will hear over and over, things happening

“in order that the prophecy might be fulfilled.”

Jesus is beginning his public ministry in Galilee where lie the areas

of the ancient tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun,

the very lands,

which in Isaiah's time were accused of having abandoned God.

Zebulun & Naphtali: Lands of darkness.

Into this land of historic darkness comes Jesus The Christ,

The Light of the World.

As Christians we believe the ministry and healings and teaching of Jesus

to be the light that entered a dark, dark world.

And Jesus begins to call his disciples.

He calls Andrew and Peter, two brothers,

and Matthew the Evangelist writes

IMMEDIATELY they leave their nets and follow him.

The three continue on, come to James and John in the boat with their father,

and Jesus calls the two brothers.

Once again Matthew tells us,

IMMEDIATELY they come.

Notice that adverb Immediately throughout the stories in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew uses it often, just as he uses the fulfillment of prophecy

to render his narrative enthralling.

Many sermons and articles have been written questioning

how the two sets of brothers could drop everything,

and IMMEDIATELY join Jesus.

What about their families? their livelihoods?

Today I'll leave you to brood curiously about the IMMEDIATELY'S.

I want to remain with the Darkness:

“of course, we're all afraid of the dark.”

Dr. Brazelton, in his wisdom, meant much more than just the darkness

that falls after sunset each evening.

The darkness that can consume us

can have nothing to do with sun and moon,

nothing to do with chronological time.

We walk through darkness in a variety of ways --

it's part of living.

As I talked to a friend this week

who has moved through the darkness of being unemployed for some months,

he spoke of the darkness of insecurity, of lack of faith in himself,

of deep fear that he might, indeed, never work again.

And I asked him where was the light in that darkness?

His response was that it was the people who believed in him,

the people who accompanied him

through that tunnel of fear and uncertainty,

that it was through them that he felt sustained and uplifted by God.

Think of the dark times in our lives:

the death of a deeply loved person,

the horror of an accident which results in loss of livelihood,

a dark time when everything you believed in seemed up for grabs,

or when a relative or work colleague betrayed you,

when you lost your core through addiction,---

there are more dark tunnels in this life

than any of us wants to count.

And all of us walk through some of them.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

The Great Light which Isaiah promises us,

the Good News which Jesus models for us,

these are the lanterns which accompany us through our various tunnels.

“I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

So how does God manifest that light when we are caught by darkness?

There are SO many ways we could not count them.

Think of your darkest time.

Who or what accompanied you through that time?

You may never have thought of your helper as LIGHT.

But he or she was OF the light.

Writer, spiritual leader, and Quaker Parker Palmer

talks of a dark, dark time of despair

while he was suffering from a deep clinical depression.

He was in utter darkness.

He could barely tie his shoes.

Day after day he sat in a gray world.

And every afternoon at about four o'clock

one of his friends from his church

came and sat with him for an hour or so.

He said very little, just sat WITH him.

Palmer says that was the greatest gift to him.

That person brought to him light,

when Palmer could not see it.

When he emerged from his depression, gradually, little by little

he re-assumed his life.

And he was able to recognize the light

in the friend who merely sat with him.

“The people who walk in darkness shall see a great light.”

The light overcomes the darkness.

We are here in this holy place to give thanks

for The Light of God,

the light that overcomes all darkness,
darkness of evil, of illness, of addiction, of despair.
A psychologist friend who understands the need for mystery,
for the holy to be integral to our lives,
writes of the alchemy of grief, fear, or despair.
It's emotional alchemy she says,
only achieved by the process of moving THROUGH.
She believes that through what I would call the light of God,
through Alchemy, a chemical change,
we will overcome the darkness.
“The deepest faith,” she writes, “is that which confers value on life
even after having looked into the worst.”
She writes of how spiritual alchemy works
to turn grief into gratitude
to turn fear to joy
to make from despair faith.
At times in our lives we walk into and through
the utter darkness of grief, fear, despair.

It is Christ's light which enables us,
sometimes after long struggle,
sometimes over what seems like forever,
sometimes against impossible odds,
to resurrect from grief... gratitude
from fear... joy
and from despair... faith.

We are all afraid of the dark.
But we need never walk through the darkness
without the light of God.

AMEN.