

“The Fullness of God”
Colossians 1:15-20; 2:6-17
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, July 28, 2019

“You know what I don’t like about stories?

They have beginnings.”

That’s how an article - - on a web blog by Timothy Deenihan - - begins.

The article is titled: “It was a dark and stormy night”.

He refers to that classic old cliché beginning of a scary story:

“It was a dark and stormy night”

Here’s what he says about the beginnings and endings of stories, and how they impact us:

“I hate that stories have beginnings - - that people RELATE to stories - - and that they are waiting for their own stories to begin. / I hate that people expect life to happen TO them - - and then - - the anger and frustration and bitterness that ensues - - when it DOES!

I hate that people are trained by stories - - to believe that their own stories are DUE a happy ending. / That they can’t understand WHY it ISN’T all working out.

People can’t understand why their lives aren’t more like works of fiction.

I hate that - - people would rather WATCH their own lives - - than LIVE them.”

Well today - - I hope this time with these scriptures will inspire us to LIVE our lives just a little bit more fully. / That we could be honest about how things go - - and not expect happy endings that are never coming - - but rather - - choose to live in this MIDDLE time - - between beginning and end - - more fully.

There is a connection between - - living more fully in the middle of life - - and the Bible readings this summer. / We have been reading the Old Testament prophets. / And the prophets are all about “the END”. / The prophets look AHEAD. /

Sometimes the prophets announce DOOM - - and say things like “The END is near”.
 But as we have seen in the last few weeks reading through Amos - - this is primarily a
 HOPEFUL act. / The prophets announce UNHAPPY endings - - partly to try to get people to
 CHANGE.

They are deeply concerned about - - life in the NOW.

And so they describe possible futures - - in ways that might change the present.

Much of what concerned the prophets in Old Testament times was abuse of power.

They saw the kings and people in power abusing the poor.

They saw the rich and powerful being greedy and selfish.

They saw people abandoning God’s ways.

And so they spoke out against it.

In the New Testament - - Paul - - is similar.

Paul is no softy.

Like the outspoken prophets of old - - Paul tells it like he sees it.

Paul challenges the powers of this world.

But - - Paul has one thing the prophets haven’t got...

Paul has access to something he calls, “the fullness of God”

Language Paul uses to describe - - Jesus.

Christ - - for Paul - - is the “first-born of all creation”

And all real legitimate powers come through Christ.

Could the prophets of the Old Testament have imagined such a thing?

Some might argue it’s what they were waiting for.

Could we say - - that Paul’s “fullness of God” is the proper END to their story?

The story of the prophets begins, on a DARK and STORMY night.

There is corruption and violence in the world.

Leaders are going astray.

Greed and abuse are everywhere.

In some ways - - that's how the New Testament - - begins.

But the unexpected ending that Paul announces is: the fullness of God.

Paul says, in chapter two - - the philosophy and the festivals of this world are incomplete.

Human concepts and traditions can be distractions.

They are incomplete - - and a SHADOW.

They are not - - - FULL. / They are a shadow...

The FULLNESS of God - - is in Christ.

Christ who "disarmed the principalities and powers" of the world.

Christ who offers this fullness of life - - to us.

When I read about this "shadow" in Paul I wonder.

I wonder if the prophets - - were a kind of shadow - - of Paul.

I wonder if God - - was not at work through the centuries - - foreshadowing.

Do the prophets - - foreshadow - - Paul?

And in doing so - - in some way - - do they anticipate Jesus?

The writer who first wrote, "It was a dark and stormy night" might not admit it now.

The line has become - - a cliché if not a laughing stock. / Snoopy types it over and over in the Peanuts cartoon. / It's the classic melodramatic - - horror story opening.

But it wasn't a cliché phrase in 1830 when Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote the novel which began "It was a dark and stormy night, the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals when it was checked by a violent gust of wind." / The novel was called "Paul Clifford".

It's a story about a robber - - who is the son of a rich judge.

The robber is sentenced to death.

And as time went by, decades after this novel was written, the opening line stuck.

It became famous.

But famous in a not so good way.

It became a cliché.

To begin a story with that line - - seems to foreshadow doom.

On the other hand - - it is a famous line - - and it has inspired other stories.

Madeline L'Engle starts "A Wrinkle in Time" with the line.

AND - - did you know - - that the original novel - - has a happy ending?

That robber - - who was sentenced to death - - escapes to America and gets married.

Sometimes - - scary stories - - have happy endings.

And sometimes - - they WAKE us UP - - to live more fully.

But in any case - - life is NO fairy tale.

And sometimes it truly IS - - scary.

And that's why - - the scariness - - and judgment of the prophets in the Old Testament - - are ultimately about - - hope. / The prophets - - were trying inspire - - a BETTER future - - by foreshadowing doom.

Sometimes - - our SHADOW side - - is strong.

And the prophets - - - and Paul - - - knew about that.

Our shadow side...

And the shadow side of humanity...

Why is it so strong?

Why do people STILL have to speak out against injustice, abuse and greed?

Robert Louis Stevenson said this about his shadow:

“I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me.

And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.

He is very, very like me - - from the heels up to the head;

And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.”

Just like Stevenson - - Paul knew - - our shadow side is close to our real self.

We are captivated by our shadow side.

We are captivated by philosophy - - and our own traditions.

We are captivated by our knowledge and power.

But - - none of that - - makes our lives FULL.

The fullness of God - - is something else.

And Paul - - if he did NOTHING else - - Paul tried to get people to be honest about their shadow side - - and their failings and their sin.

Like the prophets of old.

There is a short story by Laura Richards called , “The Shadow” and it goes like this:

A child was crying one day.

This crying child was sitting - - looking at its shadow - - and crying.

Sitting - - with its back to the sun.

An angel asked the child: “What’s wrong?”

The child responded to the angel: “The world is so dark”

“Don’t you hear the birds singing?” asked the angel.

“Yes but I don’t know where they are.

Oh why must I stay in this sad grey world?”

“I can’t see the birds - - only their shadow”

Then - - the angel LIFTED the child up - - and turned it around.

The angel set its face - - to the sun.

“Look” said the angel.

“There are the birds”

“Yes there they are”

“The SUN is shining” said the child.

“It was shining all the time” said the angel.

“The shadow is GONE” said the child.

“NO” - - said the angel - - “The shadow is BEHIND you.”

The shadow is behind you - - where it belongs.

I believe that if we open our ears to what Paul is telling us the same can be true for us.

The fullness of God - - is like that sunshine to the child.

We can put shadows where they belong.

They don’t go away - - but they don’t dominate our vision.

I HOPE we will all try to do that.

Because if we don’t - - we might get used to the shadows.

How do we deal with the dark and shadows - - IS the question.

In Colossians, Paul calls it the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light.

So how do we deal with the darkness and the shadows?

Do we turn around and face the sun - - as in the story?

Or do we ALTER - - the darkness?

As in Emily Dickinson's poem: "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark"...

"We grow accustomed to the dark

When Light is put away

As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp

To witness her good bye

The bravest grope around a little

But as they learn to see...

Either - - the Darkness alters

Or - - something in the sight

Adjusts itself to Midnight

And LIFE - - steps - - ALMOST - - straight."