

“...when the power of darkness rules.” Luke 22:53

I want you to know something about me.

I'm afraid of two things.

The dark.

And thunderstorms.

My Grandma and Grandpa's house had five rooms.

My Grandpa fought with the Marines at Iwo Jima in WWII.

After the war he bought four army barracks at the Donaldson Center and built the house around them on land his Father gave to him.

I remember the first night I spent by myself with them in that house.

The guest bedroom was just down the hall from their bedroom.

It had two single beds.

One bed was beside a bookshelf that held a set of Time Life books titled “How To Fix Anything.”

He used them to help him fix...well, to fix anything.

The other bed was beside a window that looked out into a fig tree that stood quietly next to the house.

I was eight years old.

I shared a room at home with my younger brothers, so I was accustomed to having someone in the room with me, used to hearing and feeling a soft breath rise and fall beside me, comforted by the answer “Yes” when I woke in the night and asked, “Is anyone here?”

At my Grandparents' house, I had the guest bedroom all to myself.

They were early birds, my Grandparents were.

My Grandpa often joked and called my Grandma a night owl, which meant that she nodded on the couch until 9:30 p.m., the time she went to bed.

He was asleep by 8 p.m.

My Grandpa kissed me on one cheek and went off to bed.

An hour and a half later, my Grandma kissed me on the other as she rose from the couch, took me by the hand, and led me to my room.

MY room. Not the OUR room of my room at my house but the MY room of theirs.

She tucked me in the bed by the window.

"I love you," she whispered and was gone.

I heard the floorboards creak softly as she walked lightly to her bed.

I heard a grunt as my Grandpa moved over to give up her side of the bed.

I heard their breathing, at first in counterpoint and then in harmony, as they drifted off to deep sleep.

My ears were sensitive to the sounds around me, listening for...whatever the ears listen for in darkness.

I fell asleep to the sweet sound of my Grandparents' breathing.

I woke with a start.

"What was that," I asked out loud.

No one answered.

There was only silence.

I took a deep breath, rolled on my side, and peeked out the window. I saw a gentle sway in the fig tree and heard a gentle breeze through its branches but nothing more.

I closed my eyes again.

"Boom," I heard in the distance, from the mountains that rise with grace around us.

I opened my eyes...again.

A faint flash of light lit up the room.

"One, two three..." I began counting until I got to the number twelve and "Boom," I heard again. (You know why I did this, don't you? So I could know the miles between the storm and me.)

"Maybe," I thought to myself, "Maybe the storm is moving away from us, over the hills, up the mountain, out of sight and sound.

Flash.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight..."

Boom!

The gentle sway of the breeze turned into a mighty shake of the wind as the fig tree scraped and scratched the screen of the window beside me.

Flash.

"One, two, three, four..."

Boom!

I pulled the covers off of my body and dangled my leg off the side of the bed.

I did not ask myself, "Should I go to my Grandparents' room?"

I simply got up and headed down the hall toward them.

My little feet were at the threshold of their bedroom door when there was a flash that lit up the whole room and a boom that shook the whole house, all at the same time.

The storm was directly over us!

The world record in the long jump at that time was a bit over 29 feet.

On that night, at that moment, tiny Trevor Scott Barton soared over twice that distance and landed in his Grandpa and Grandma's bed!

My heart was beating as loudly as the thunder...my mind was flashing as wildly as the lightning...as the hands of my Grandparents closed around mine.

"Were you scared?" asked my Grandpa with a kindness in his voice reserved for me, the boy who made him a Grandpa.

"Yes."

"...when the power of darkness rules."

Today, in our text from Luke 23:1-10, Pilate is the thunder and Herod is the lightning.

They are the storm in the story, and Jesus appears before them as a person in the middle of a summer thunderstorm, under heavy rain, fierce wind, loud thunder, and sharp lightning with no place to run and no place to hide.

The powerful and the privileged will say anything and do anything to maintain their power and privilege.

If their power and privilege are threatened, there will be darkness.

There will be a thunderstorm.

"...when the power of darkness rules."

Who: A mother and three children; don't have legal status

What: Swept up in an ICE raid; taken during a nighttime raid on a dairy farm; sent to a detention facility in Texas;

Where: Sackets Harbor, NY; near the US - Canada border;

“...when the power of darkness rules.”

I visited one of my unhoused friends at the hospital this afternoon.

I met him at the beginning of summer when I started offering pastoral care to people who came for social work services and case management each day.

He was sitting on the brick wall in front of Triune.

“Hey,” I said.

This is the first word I say to people when I want to be a friend.

“Is it okay if I sit down beside you?”

He smiled at me.

It was early in the morning and his smile was like the sunrise.

“Of course it’s okay if you sit down beside me. On the street we always need to be a friend and make a friend.”

That sounded like some deep street knowledge to me, much like the farm knowledge my grandpa used to drop when I was walking beside him working in his garden.

The first thing I noticed about my new friend, after the fact that he had an ingenuity and grit that you often find in people who live on the street, was his swollen right leg.

He had on a tattered pair of shorts and a raggedy pair of tennis shoes with no socks because it was a hot South Carolina day for the beginning of June.

“I guess you can see that one of my legs is swollen bigger than the other one,” he said.

He was right. The swollen leg was twice the size of the other leg.

“How can you live on the street with a wound like that,” I asked.

And boy was there a wound.

He unwrapped the old bandage that was wrapped around his calf to show me the reason why the leg was so swollen.

I was stunned into silence.

There was a sore under the bandage that was the size of a grapefruit and the color of an angry sun.

Now, four months later, the sore was still there.

“I had to come to the hospital because I didn’t have a place with soap and clean water to wash it out during the day and night. So it got infected. They’re giving me some powerful antibiotic to fight the infection. I think it’ll be better in a

few days.”

I listened to him tenderly.

“I don’t want to be nosy,” I said, “But what’s gonna happen when you get back out on the street again? How are you gonna take care of your leg? How are you gonna take care of you?”

He looked at me tenderly.

“I’m 59 years old,” he said. “I’ve got to get off the street this time. I’ve just got to.”

“...when the power of darkness rules.”

The least and most forgotten peoples’ humanity make them sacred because they contain the imago Dei, the image of God. They represent the poor of the gospel, and as such, any gesture made to them is a gesture made toward Christ. To mistreat them is to mistreat Jesus. To look into these poor, marginalized, and suffering faces is to recognize the suffering of Christ. To establish power and privilege at the expense of them is to make a mockery of Christ, who gave his life in solidarity with the wretched of the earth. Hence, salvation means crucifying the power and privilege derived from oppressing the poor so that we authentically accompany Christ in the struggle to liberate them.

(My thoughts derived from Miguel A. De La Torre, Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2013, p. 13)

Jesus stands before Pilate and Herod.

Today, the least and most forgotten among us stand before them, too.

For Christ today is found in the least and most forgotten among us.

By that I mean this.

Washing dishes.

This is how I remember Momadu.

When I was growing up at my house during pre-dishwasher days, mom put ‘wash the dishes’ on my chore list every day and I washed them.

Obediently albeit begrudgingly.

In the pre-dishwasher days in Mali, though, Momadu washed the dishes with joy.

How could he do something as mundane as washing dishes and do it with joy?

Perhaps it’s because joy is a fruit.

A fruit that grows in the heart.

Perhaps it’s because Momadu has eyes that see and ears that hear, eyes and ears of the heart.

He always wore tattered t-shirts with imprints from churches in the Deep South that missionaries gave him over the years.

They were stretched and holey.

So was he.

He was a farmer trying to eke out an existence for his family and for himself on a harsh and broken land.

He was a simple parson trying to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, trying to love his neighbor as himself, trying to love his enemy.

He was my friend who would go to the ends of the earth and back again with me. (And many times we WERE at the ends of the earth among people who'd been overlooked and forgotten).

Esse Quam Videri, says the old Latin phrase.

To be is more important than to appear to be.

Momadu just is.

That's what makes him special.

That's what makes him beautiful, ingenious, wonderful and courageous.

He is Momadu.

He is himself.

Once, his worn, dirty flip-flops were on the ground in front of the door of the community house at our mission station.

How much was he like his flip-flops?

He was worn from much serving, worn from much trying to live out the second part of the great commandment.

To love his neighbors.

To know his neighbors.

To know everyone is his neighbor.

Everyone.

In Mali, flip-flops cost less than one U.S. Dollar.

That doesn't seem like much money to me.

If my flip-flops were like his flip-flops, then I would have throw them away and bought a new pair.

But one dollar can buy three days worth of vegetables to put into his families supper.

So when Momadu's flip-flop strap broke, he repaired them and kept wearing them until they turned back into the dust from which they were made, from which we are all made.

In the same way, Momadu will keep on loving until he is completely worn out.

That will be his mark when he limps toward God.

He will limp on busted flip-flops.

And God will hold him until he and his flip-flops are whole again.

I often wonder, "Who is a saint in our world today?"

We surely need them, don't we?

Well, one time, my flip-flops were filthy dirty, caked in mud and tainted with cow manure.

I took them off at the back door of our house and went inside to take a shower.

After I dressed, I walked over to the window to watch the dusking of afternoon into evening as the sun hung on the edge of the African sky like a giant, red-ripe tomato.

I looked at the sky.

Then I looked at the ground.

There was Momadu.

He was washing my shoes.

He was kneeling beside our water spigot as if he were in prayer and was washing my shoes with the simplest of elements, water and his hands.

He still had miles to go before he slept, as Robert Frost so eloquently wrote.

He washed my shoes.

And that, my friends, is the most eloquent thing I've ever seen.

I know for sure that Momadu is not perfect.

But I know equally for sure that he is a saint.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the beloved community," says the good book.

That beloved community is in good hands in Momadu's hands.

My friend in one of the poorest countries in the world.

A woman and her three children in Sackets Harbor, NY

My friend on the streets.

All in darkness.

All in the storm.

With Jesus.

But we have a great hope.

The storm will end.

The sun will rise.

But you'll have to come back to Triune next week for that story.

Amen.