

April 10, 2020 – Mark 15:33-34 (Good Friday)

“This has been the Lentiest Lent ever.” This statement has been floating around social media for a while now and I really have to agree. This has been everything Lent is supposed to be, taken to the extreme.

Self-denial? We've been doing lots of that. Charity to our neighbor? I just preached last night on how important that is during a time of crisis like this. Somber reflection on the frailty of our flesh? There's nothing quite like a pandemic to inspire somber reflection on life and death. Most of all, this Lent has just felt very... dark. Very austere. Very joyless. All things we associate with Lent.

Which is ironic, really. Because Lent is actually about light. Did you know that? The word Lent comes from the Old Germanic “langa-tinaz” meaning “long day.” Lent is simply another word for spring. But centuries ago, it was adopted by the church as the name for this spring church festival in which we remember Christ’s suffering and death.

So a word that actually means “long day” is used to describe a season of the church year characterized by darkness. Our paraments are black today. Our walls are bare of brightly colored banners. Our hymns are somber and melancholy. Even though we're doing this in the middle of the afternoon, it doesn't feel very bright outside. And that was literally true of the passion as well.

St Mark tells us that “*it was the third hour when they crucified [Jesus],*” but that “*when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.*” The Jewish clock started at sunrise, roughly 6AM. So they crucified Jesus at 9AM. And from noon to 3PM, darkness came over the land.

Talking about Jesus' crucifixion feels very dark and gloomy for us. But for those who were there it was literally dark and gloomy. And I wonder what they thought at that moment. Did they try to explain it away as a freakish eclipse that none of their astronomers saw coming? Maybe. Did they see it as a sign of evil descending upon them? Darkness is usually associated with the sin, death, and the devil, after all. That would make sense too.

In reality, though, this was not the result of astronomical phenomenon or the work of the devil. Because this moment had been prophesied about centuries earlier. The prophet Amos writes in chapter 8 that the injustice and sinfulness of Israel would one day be punished. And that, “*In that day, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping.*”

No, this was not the darkness of evil. This was the darkness of God’s wrath against evil. Like the darkness that descended over Egypt and left them paralyzed where they sat, God brought darkness upon Judea, and for three hours nothing happens. Nothing.

Jesus was first crucified at 9 in the morning, and for those three hours until noon, there’s constant activity. Jesus praying to His Father. Talking to the other criminals. Giving instructions to Mary and John. Listening to the insults of the people.

But then noon arrives. And darkness descends. And everything grinds to a halt. Jesus. His disciples. The crowd crying for his blood. The soldiers by His side. What can they do? They can’t see. They can’t move. They can’t go home. It’s too dark. The entire city of Jerusalem simply stops. For three hours.

Because human beings weren’t designed to function in that darkness. Day 1 of creation. God looks out over the uncreated void and says, “The first thing these human beings that I’m creating are going need is light.” And so he makes it. And then he makes all sorts of other things for us. Earth and sky. Oceans and mountains. Sun, moon, stars. Plants and animals. Everything to make a home for us.

And then from the very earth of that home. From the dust of the ground. He creates us. Forms us into his creation. With a mind and spirit and holiness so like his own that we’re in the spitting image of our creator. We are his children.

And he hands creation to us and says, "I made this for you, and it is good." But then Satan enters and plants a lie in our ears. And we look at God and we say, "Thanks! Now get out. We don't need you here anymore. This is our world. We're the gods here."

What can he do? Let us run around, sinful and deluded? Drunk on our own arrogance? And in complete defiance of the authority he has over us? That wouldn't solve anything.

No, instead he looks down and he says, "Pretend all you like. Be the pathetic little gods you want to be. But when everything is said and done, I'm going to put you in your place. I'm going to show you what you are without me. From dust you were created. To dust you will return."

It was a harsh judgment. But God had not abandoned humanity. His love for his creation never changed. And for the history of the Old Testament, he pleaded with his people to turn back to him. Guiding them with his law. Blessing them with his presence. Offering them prophet after prophet to warn them of their end if they didn't repent.

But they rejected each of these. Persecuted them. Killed them. Taunted God and begged for his wrath. Until he finally sent his Son to deal with humanity once and for all. And they persecuted him. And they crucified him. And they taunted God and begged for his wrath.

And the world went dark as God's anger stripped away even the most basic aspect of the creation He had made for us, we who stood there murdering his Son. And God poured out his wrath. Judgment for every time any person had ever said in their thoughts, words or deeds, "Get out, God. I don't need you. This is my life. I'm the god here."

God poured out his wrath. But it wasn't on us that he took out his anger. It was on his Son that God's wrath was satisfied. It was God's Son who bore the penalty for our sin. It was God's Son who died the death we deserve. It was God's Son who was buried in the ground and returned to the dust of the earth.

And after three hours of darkness. After three hours of that wrath being poured out, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" But I wonder... was Jesus saying that for his own sake, or for ours?

Was Jesus simply crying out in human anguish at the Father's wrath? Maybe. Or maybe he placing that question into our minds. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? My God, my God, why have you forsaken... him? Your own Son. Why have you forsaken him?"

There's really only one answer to that question. The Father poured out his wrath on the sacred head of Jesus and turned his face away from the suffering of his Son... for us. He put Jesus into darkness so that we might see the light of his grace. He let his Son die so that we might live.

He has borne our griefs. He has carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his stripes we are healed.

When the Father looked down from heaven, he looked at his Son and saw all the evil the world had ever done and ever would do. So that when the Father looks upon us, he sees all the righteousness of His Son. Because Jesus bore our iniquity, we are accounted righteous.

This may have been the Lentiest Lent ever. But that's a good thing. For Lent is a season of longer days. It is a season light, even when it feels dark. For the true darkness, the darkness of sin and death, was taken by the Son of God on the cross. So that we may live in the light of life. Amen.