

“Into and Out of Darkness”
May 1, 2022
Scripture: Psalm 30; Acts 9:1-20

Paul is probably the best known figure in the New Testament. Well, maybe second best. But Jesus is nearly universally admired by Christians and non-Christians alike. Even folks who don't really seem to like or understand what he taught want to claim him as their own. But with Paul the feelings are very mixed. He's often thought of as misogynist, as homophobic, as too supportive of authoritarian government. In his book *The Luminous Darkness*, Howard Thurman tells about his grandmother, a woman born into slavery, who when he offered to read her something from the Bible insisted on hearing anything except something from Paul. She said the preachers would always use Paul to keep the slaves obedient. She didn't want anything to do with him.

That was my opinion about Paul for a long time. But over the years I've come to believe that Paul has been misused and misrepresented within the New Testament by redactors putting words in his mouth or later authors writing in his name and by the Church that has uncritically used those misrepresentations to justify keeping women and other people on the margins and silent. It's taken years of study and reflection to change my opinion of him, and that's a lot more work than most folks want to do. But like it or not, Paul is responsible for a huge amount of our scripture, so if we're interested in the Bible having an impact on our lives, then we really can't avoid coming to terms with Paul.

And I think that's what Luke, the writer of Acts, felt, too. Paul was an irresistible force in the early church. His letters were circulated much more widely than he ever intended. One author, whoever wrote the second letter of Peter, even mentions Paul directly. He writes, “Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” So, even as far back as that there was controversy surrounding Paul. The writer of Acts couldn't possibly ignore him when talking about how the church spread in the Empire. But he needed to fit Paul into the story in a particular way.

In their book *In Search of Paul*, New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan and New Testament archeologist Jonathan L. Reed, describe two different Pauls presented in the Bible: the Pauline Paul, presented in Paul's own words in his letters and the Lucan Paul, presented here in Acts. Some things line up... but some things don't.

This story of Paul's conversion is one that doesn't exactly square with Paul's words. Paul never describes anything as dramatic as what Luke describes in Acts. And in the little

information he does share about his conversion, it sounds like it took quite a bit longer than a sudden encounter and three days of blindness. But Luke knew how to tell a good story. And he had to somehow explain how it was possible for a person to go from “breathing threats and murder” to writing “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” A transformation like that deserves a little drama.

Whatever actually happened to Paul, whatever he saw or heard whether it was on the road to Damascus or lying awake at night haunted by the path of violence and destruction he was on, he experienced a complete transformation of his heart and mind. Those three days of blindness may have been a plunge into the depths of his soul. Like Jonah in the belly of the fish or Jesus in the tomb, Paul was shaped in the darkness, given a new life. And when he emerged he was not the same person; he was reborn.

Paul talks about dying and rising with Christ. He says the only way to be truly free of an old life filled with hatred and bitterness, a life spent breathing threats and murder, is to enter the darkness of death, to embrace it and let it mold you. And through that process Paul let go of the certainties and assumptions that had fueled his campaign against the people of the Way and discovered the light of ambiguity. He was able to see the world more fully, to appreciate the nuances that make it possible for people of different backgrounds and social status and faith to live in harmony and become members of the same body.

For Paul darkness isn't a place of despair, it's a place of growth; it's sacred not scary. Are there elements in our lives that keep us trapped in cycles of destruction; do we find ourselves breathing threats and murder against those we don't understand? How do we enter that sacred darkness? Where can we go to find our Damascus Road?

I think the place we need to go is within ourselves. There are vast depths in our souls waiting to be plumbed. As the 7th century mystic Isaac the Syrian wrote, “Be at peace with your own soul; then heaven and earth will be at peace with you. Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you, and so you will see the things that are in heaven; for there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the kingdom is hidden within your soul. Flee from sin, dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend.” The ladder is hidden within your soul. Paul found that ladder to take him from fear and hatred to a love that never ends. And it lies within us as well.

One of the values of reading the stories about Paul and Peter and the other disciples is to find in them some comfort knowing that if they can make their way into and out of darkness, then there's surely hope for us. Like Paul we are being called to die so that we can rise. We're called to die to the assumptions and certainties preventing us from seeing clearly. We're called to die to bigotries and hatreds, grudges and resentments. We're called to embrace a sacred darkness by looking honestly at ourselves and the ways we breathe threats and murder.

As Paul insists over and over, this is the only path to become one with Christ. We enter the darkness of a death like his so that we can be raised to a resurrection like his. And through our transformation God can accomplish the transformation of the world. For what happens in the darkness isn't only for our sake. Paul was called to become Christ's servant for the world, to become an instrument for the gospel so God's kingdom could be revealed. In the same way our transformation is meant to bring God's kingdom of compassion and justice to the world. We no longer live for ourselves alone. As children of resurrection we live for the world. The ladder to the kingdom we find hidden in our souls will take us to heights of love we can scarcely imagine.

If we long for a world where hope abounds, where compassion replaces indifference, where love is the highest virtue, then we can't wait for the world to come around. It all begins with us. Into the darkness we must go, dying to our old selves so we can rise into the light of God's kingdom.

Amen