

This Coming Dark Night

Luke 4:1-13

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is the period of 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter. It is a time that reverses the growing light we experienced during Advent as we awaited the coming Christ Child. As we progress through Lent we are led further and further into darkness as Jesus approaches the cross and the tomb.

Lent is a time to reflect on the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. Perhaps that's why there is a tradition of "giving up" or sacrificing something during this season. What if we looked at Lent from an opposing point of view, as a time to "take on" something just as Jesus took on our sins on the cross? This can be a time of taking on the intention to be more receptive to God in our lives, to participate more fully in bringing the kingdom here on earth.

By being intentional in our reception of God in our lives we are helped to gain the spiritual depth to be faithful to the mystery that is Immanuel, God with us. The God who is with us not only in good times, but also in our times of trials and temptations.

Jesus did not ask for temptations, yet here he is in today's story, his robes still damp from his baptism in the Jordan, being driven out into the desert to spend 40 days alone. He had just received his first blessing

from God as the Holy Spirit descended on him as he rose from the water and the words, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) were heard by those present. It is that same Holy Spirit that then drives him into the desert to endure a lengthy time of deprivation and temptation. Jesus accepted that this was necessary to his ministry if he was to do God’s will. The fact that His time of testing was not for just a day or two, but for 40 long, lonely days, may serve as an indication that we, too, may have to faithfully endure seasons of long and drawn-out difficulty. During this time Jesus was faced with not just one, but several overwhelming temptations.

St. John of the Cross addresses these times of separation and temptation in his writings on the Dark Night of the Soul. The dark night is in essence the hardships and difficulties experienced in the soul as it seeks to join in union with the Creator God. It describes the transformational journey that takes place within us when we are suffering. While we understand today that the dark night is usually temporary, it may last for longer periods. Jesus’ desert journey could be seen as one of those longer journeys. St. John’s own journey informed his understanding of the Dark Night. The website Third Eve gives this synopsis:

A contemporary of Theresa of Avila who served as her spiritual mentor among the Carmelites, John of the Cross fell prey to a group of opposing friars who kidnapped and imprisoned him. Though starved and harshly beaten over many months, John wrote

much of his most inspired poetry during this time. After nine months, he escaped under cover of darkness, which escape provided the central image of his poem, “Dark Night of the Soul.” Thus, the inspiration for the poem occurred only after John’s suffering convinced him of God’s abandonment. He taught that every Christian pilgrim would suffer similarly.

For John, the God-seeker is initiated through the loss of material and psychological possessions, a direct challenge to a person’s fundamental sense of safety and security. The ego is attached to power, control, reputation, and material things. During the dark night of the soul, we are compelled to open our hands and let go of all that the ego values. The soul then tumbles into a state of “unknowing” so profound that he is propelled into isolation, for the journey requires solitude.

Jesus in his desert isolation could feel he was abandoned by God. This would be a bookend to his felt abandonment on the cross when he cried out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” Stripped of all material comforts, all social interactions, Jesus was totally alone. When the devil came to tempt him, he could easily have given in to those temptations. Stones turned to bread would fill his empty stomach. Although he was already promised dominion over the world by God, the devil was offering to speed up the process and forego having to hang on a cross. Lastly, feeling abandoned in a desolate place, it would be very

tempting to ask God to prove himself worthy by saving Jesus from a fatal jump from the pinnacle of the Temple. But Jesus remembered his true mission and continued to trust the God who called him his Son. Jesus proved himself to be worthy of being called the Son of God.

By refusing to feed himself, Jesus would eventually go on to feed thousands. By refusing to seize political power offered by the devil, the proclamation of God's Kingdom, the empire of peace and justice, spread to the entire world. By refusing to throw himself from the Temple spire to see if God would send angels to save him, he would later confidently go to the cross trusting that God's purpose would overcome the world's desire to silence him through death.

This brings me back to my original question: What if we looked at Lent as a time to "take on" something just as Jesus took on our sins on the cross? Jesus took on the mantle of the Son of God, Immanuel – God with us. By taking on that assignment, he was set up for trials, tribulations, and eventually a shameful death on a cross. He endured a dark night of the soul at both the beginning and end of his earthly ministry. As professing Christians, we are joined with Christ in the task of kingdom building which often will lead us to the same desert testing, the dark night of our souls, as we seek the face of God.

Over the past several years we have experienced a worldwide pandemic, a contentious national election, and we are currently experiencing events

never before seen in our country. I can't think of anyone who might not feel they have lived the dark night. I know there are several, if not all of us in this congregation, who have experienced trials, tribulations, and tragedies in the midst of the greater upheavals of the past few years. Collectively we have lived a dark night. Yet we are still here because we know that in that dark night, God is still present. He hears our prayers, he is still providing for us giving food and shelter, community for support in the hard times, and the promise that the grave is not the end.

As our world struggles with wars and rumors of wars, poverty, sexual exploitation, climate induced natural disasters, and too many other trials to name, we are called to intentionally seek God, to take on His mission to make a positive impact in this world. We are God's agents in this dark night to bring hope and healing to a hurting world. The same world that tried to silence Jesus, the same world he came to save, needs believers now and always to carry His message of peace and justice. We do so in full confidence that God is with us, even in the darkest night.

May we be given strength and wisdom for this journey into that dark night.

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March 6, 2022 Hatfield Church of the Brethren

March 9, 2025 Hatfield Church of the Brethren