

He walked out of the doctor's office and took her hand, fighting his tears, not daring to look at her, willing himself to bravery. What would this diagnosis of lung cancer mean for her, for their sons, for him? It had been eleven years since her melanoma had been successfully treated, but he remembered those days with aching clarity. Would the treatment work, or not? How much would she suffer? How would they survive? Everything around them was dark, so very dark; they were without light, in the midst of darkness.

She stood at the kitchen sink, wiping the last dish and looking out the window. The kitchen looked good, she thought, no, actually, it looked great. Neat, clean, tidy. Unlike her life. Her husband had not seemed himself lately, her job was in jeopardy, she'd had a falling out with her best friend, she'd caught her teenage daughter sneaking out late at night, and her son's grades were falling. She opened the utility closet to look for a broom to sweep the floor, and caught her breath at what she saw—a large stash of liquor. Was it her daughter's—or her son's—or her husband's? Was she living with an alcoholic—or two or three? Everything around her was dark; she was without light, in the midst of darkness.

They sat at the table in silence, not a stony silence, but a silence in which neither knew what to say. Neither dared look at the other. The papers lay on the table, scattered, symbolizing what lay ahead of them. The pink slip. The credit card bill. The letter from their financial advisor, informing them of their losses. They had had this sort of conversation before, but it had never been so serious. It was time to sell the house, the house that they had scrimped and saved for, the house that they had designed, the house that they had loved, the house in which their children had grown to adulthood. It was time to leave their home. Everything around them was dark; they were without light, in the midst of darkness.

Darkness—or dark, dark, darkness? What is the darkness in your life, my friend? Is it living without electricity—or heat—or water? Is it watching your life savings—or your pension—or your hours—shrink month by month in this ongoing economic crisis? Is it illness misdiagnosed by a doctor who didn't listen when you outlined your symptoms—or your inability to pay for this month's prescriptions? Is it the diagnosis of an inoperable disease—or the loss of a loved one? Is it the news that your closest friend is moving—or doesn't seem to care about you anymore? What's your experience of darkness?

Life is filled with darkness, from birth to death—well, even before birth, and even after death. A couple who would make great parents is unable to conceive. A woman bears a stillborn daughter. A baby is abandoned in the dumpster. A toddler is struck by a car and loses his eyesight. A first grader, sexually abused by an uncle, is unable to learn to read. A middle school student is devastated when his parents divorce. A college student is raped by her date, who doesn't listen to her “No.” A gay teacher hides his identity, fearful that he will lose his job. A whole division in a company is eliminated. Last week, in Texas, a man stabbed someone displaying a *keffiyeh*, a Palestinian fringed scarf, and this week, in New Jersey, a man admitted to viciously attacking four Orthodox Jews with a car he stole from another Orthodox Jew. Life is filled with darkness—or dark, dark, darkness, even before birth, and after death.

What is your experience of darkness, my friend? Is it darker for you today than last year—or last month—or even yesterday? What is the darkness around you? Does it threaten to overwhelm you—to engulf you—to surround you and swallow you up?

The disciples' experience of darkness began when Jesus told them, for the first time, in Chapter 8 of Mark, just before today's story, that he "must undergo great suffering... and be killed... and after the third day rise again." If they had any inkling what Jesus was talking about, the disciples must have experienced darkness, great darkness. How could their teacher, their master, their lord, be expected to experience suffering? And what did he mean, he must "be killed"? How could he be killed? He was their lord—and some even dared to believe that might be the Messiah. What did he mean, he must suffer? How could the Messiah suffer? How great the darkness must have been as the disciples' journeyed to the mountaintop!

But then, the light, the glorious light! The brightness, the dazzling whiteness! The light shining in the darkness! Even as the darkness of Jesus' impending suffering and death began to descend upon the disciples, they saw the light. At least they saw a glimpse of that light. And as things got darker and darker—Jesus' arrest, his trial, his mocking, his crucifixion, his death—as things got darker and darker, that light never dimmed, even if they may have forgotten it.

In today's second lesson, from II Corinthians, Paul writes to the people in the church at Corinth, "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It is precisely out of darkness that light shines, my friends. Even when there is darkness, a light may be lit. And, once a light is lit, no matter how small it is, darkness can never triumph. Think about it. Whenever there is light, no matter how dark the darkness is, which wins? If you're in the wilderness on a cloudy night and you're surrounded by pitch darkness and you light a single match, will the darkness win? No, never. "The light shines in the darkness," the writer of John's gospel reports, "and the darkness has not overcome it." Darkness can never overcome light.

This light "shining in the darkness"—or "shining out of the darkness"—is not a candle or a flashlight or a mercury lamp or an incandescent bulb or a fluorescent tube or a sodium lamp. This light is the light of Christ, which shines without wick or filament. It's a light represented in our worship space by the Eternal Light—or some call it the Sanctuary Lamp behind altar, reminding us of God's abiding presence—and by the Paschal candle, the large candle at the baptismal font at the rear, lit at baptisms and throughout the season of Easter and placed at the casket at the time of a funeral. It's light that shines in the darkness of your life, of my life, a light that illuminates the path as we walk or run or stumble on our way. It is a light made up not of photons but of love.

This light of Christ's love shines into the darkest recesses of our lives, the recesses that we can't even see and don't dare to feel. When we begin to see the light shining out of our darkness, you and I can take courage to look into those recesses, because in the light of Christ's love we see that God knows us as we are, not as we are trying to be. We can admit our weaknesses, our failures, because we know that God accepts us as we are, not as we are trying to be—or hope we can be—or wish we could be.

This is why my colleague, Pr. Connie Bonner, suggests a change in the traditional placement of the ritual of “Confession and Forgiveness of Sins” in the Lutheran liturgy. Her argument runs something like this. Reciting the “Confession and Forgiveness” at the beginning of the service may suggest that we have to be “cleaned up” before we can worship. Similarly, reciting it just before communion, which was when we recited it in my childhood, may mislead us into thinking that we have to do something to become “worthy” to receive the bread and wine. Instead of at the beginning of worship or prior to communion, Pr. Bonner suggests that we confess our sins after communion. Only when we have received the body and blood of Jesus, only when we have been nurtured and nourished by Jesus, only when the light of Jesus’ love shines on us, can we take courage to face our sins honestly and openly and consider how we might repent, how we might amend our lives.

In the old Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church, the old “red” book, published in 1958, before the new “cranberry book,” “the blue book,” and “the green book,” in the section of the service called “The Confession of Sins,” one of the options for a word of absolution, or forgiveness, was this: “The Almighty and merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit.” “Time for amendment of life.” When we have sinned, we need to amend our lives. Pr. Bonner argues that, before we can amend our lives, we need to be made secure in God’s love. Only after we are proclaimed beloved children of God, only after we are assured of God’s love and forgiveness in Holy Communion, only after we “see the light” of Christ, can we honestly examine our lives and make choices to turn from the darkness toward the light, to move toward health and wholeness, to amend our lives.

In this coming season of Lent, which begins with the Imposition of Ashes and Holy Communion this Ash Wednesday, you are invited to do just that, to “amend” your life, to examine your life and make choices to move toward health and wholeness. In the midst of the darkness of your life—whether it’s addiction or depression or anger or loss—loss of job or loss of home or loss of your beloved—in the midst of your darkness, in this Lenten season, you are invited to “see the light” and to let Jesus shine it into the dark places of your life, into the innermost recesses of darkness, and to illuminate those recesses, so that they might have less power over you, so that you might take power over them.

There is indeed darkness all around, my friend. I don’t have to convince you of that. There is darkness at home, darkness at school, darkness at work. There is darkness in your family and among your friends and in your community, in our nation, and in the world. There is darkness around you—and even within you. But, as dark as the darkness is, there is light in the midst of your darkness. Do you see it? Can you catch the rays of light, perhaps very faint, shining afar off, shining bravely, even when it seems to be pitch black all around you? There is light there, my friend. It’s light that will triumph over your darkness. It’s light made up of love. It’s the light of Jesus’ love, shining bright, even in darkness, shining for you. Amen