

Sunday next before Advent (MP-1) (2018)

Fifty-five years ago this past Thursday the world was plunged into a state of shock as the death of President John F. Kennedy was announced from Dallas.

Darkness covered the face of these United States. Uncertainty, dismay, sorrow hung over the country like a dark cloud.

Inside that plane carrying the slain President's body back to Washington there must have been gloom of unimaginable proportion.

There was the President's widow wearing her pink blood-caked tailored suite, no doubt in a state of shock.

There was Evelyn Lincoln, the President's personal secretary, and other members of his staff overwhelmed with grief, trying to make sense of the events of the day.

There was the newly sworn-in President calling to console the late President's mother, Mrs. Rose Kennedy.

President Johnson's words, spoken after the plane had landed at Andrews Airforce Base, said it all:

"This is a sad time for all people. We have suffered a loss that cannot be weighed."

Sadly, the darkness of that day is no one-of happening. Very likely you have experienced it in your life.

Several weeks ago a friend told me about her daughter who had lost her job - not through anything she had done or had not done, mind you, but just because of the way the corporate world operates today.

The daughter, who is about my age, is very talented and well-trained in her field and hopefully will land another job quickly.

Nevertheless, when you have to pay rent, a car payment and all the other expenses associated with life today, to receive such a notice is devastating.

Perhaps you been there, and know how she felt that night as she closed the door of her apartment.

Fear grips you. A thick darkness descends. Hope seems non-existent.

We find the same gloom, despair and hopelessness in this morning's Old Testament reading.

Indeed, it one of the darkest passages in the Bible. Listen again to its opening words:

"I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light," writes the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.

The only difference between the darkness the prophet saw and the darkness in the situations I have just described is that the darkness Jeremiah saw lay in the future, about a generation away.

"The whole land shall be desolate."

It's a calamitous event that is coming. One commentary writer said:

"A sort of cosmic funeral is envisaged with the whole earth in mourning and the heavens in black."

Any way you look at it, it is a grim picture. But, what was this future calamitous event?

It was the destruction of the cities of Judah, including Jerusalem, by the Babylonians. This devastation took place in 587 B.C.

But, why is the horrible destruction coming on the people that God calls His own?

Well, Jeremiah does not leave them or us in any doubt. It is because of their persistent apostasy and idolatry.

God sent them prophet after prophet, and they would not heed their warnings.

Moreover, whenever national danger approached, what did they do? Instead of turning to God, they went down to Egypt seeking help.

This is what all this business in today's reading about a woman decking herself with ornaments is about.

Judah is that woman. Egypt is her lover that she is attempting to woe to come to her aid.

It won't work. The land is going to be laid waste. A day of reckoning is coming when the sun will not give it light.

Again, it is a grim picture. But, what should our response be as we reflect on these words that God had given to Jeremiah?

Should we allow this passage to plunge us into despair and fear and terror?

To go out and stand on some street corner with signs reading: "The end is near"? /// I think not.

Actually, if you look at this passage closer, you will find a shaft of light. Hidden in that gloom, there is a message of hope. It comes at the end of verse 27. Here we read:

"For thus hath the Lord said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end."

"Yet will I not make a full end."

God's people have been unfaithful and have set themselves up for ruin. Yet, God will have the final word, and that word will be good. The people will go into captivity, their land spoiled, but a remnant will return and Jerusalem will be rebuilt.

Ultimately, the shaft of light which breaks through in this verse will come to its full glory over the manger of Bethlehem at our Lord's birth.

These eight words – *Yet, I will not make a full end* – tell us that God's plan to bringing healing and blessing to the world will go forward. Again, these are words of hope.

In Psalm 30, verse 5, we read: **“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”** /// Same message.

But what about the dark moments you face in your life? Does this promise still hold?

When, for example, the job on which you are depending is snatched from you?

Or, when a family member gets a devastating medical prognosis?

Or, when disaster strikes this nation, as it did 55 years ago last Thursday?

The answer is, Yes!

We may despair. God does not. He is incredibly gracious and remains on the job.

What should our response be in these dark moments? Here are three suggestions:

No. 1 -- When the sky is as black as it gets, know that God’s light still shines . . . just as you know in the fiercest storm that the sun still radiates its light behind those dark clouds. You can’t see it, but it is there.

Hymn writer Edward Mote is spot on when he says:

*When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace.*

No. 1, then, is: To acknowledge God’s presence and providence, no matter the weather.

No. 2 -- Remember what God’s people of old were commanded to do when they found themselves in dark circumstances. It wasn’t to go down to Egypt seeking help, but to seek it from the Lord.

“Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart,” we find God saying further over in the book of Jeremiah (29:13).

And so, let's be on our guard against this tendency . . . this all too common tendency . . . of making the Lord our last stop for help. Rather let us make Him our first.

No. 3. Be on the outlook for shafts of light. Remember those eight words almost hidden in today's passage: **"Yet I will not make a full end"**.

I want to suggest that those shafts of light are always present. Sometimes we just have to look for them.

After all, the God in whom we have anchored our faith is the God of hope. Romans 15:13 tells us as much:

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Expect great things from the God of Hope.

Allow me to close with a story, one which points us in the right direction in those times when the night is dark and we are far from home.

Back in the 1930s or 40s, before airplanes had all the navigational equipment they have now, a small plane was being buffeted in a storm west of the Cumberland plateau over in Middle Tennessee.

The pilot had completely lost his bearings. All appeared to be lost.

Then, that shaft of light we have been talking about appeared.

It was the light coming from the massive 40-foot cross that stands on the brow the Sewanee mountain, by then illuminated by means of electricity.

In the light of the cross, he was able to regain his bearings and find his way home.

May it be so for us. **There is never a night so dark that there is not hope,** and that, my friends, is the message of this sermon this morning.