

Shadows and Light
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

In our call to worship this morning, we read a line from a Celtic blessing written by the poet John O'Donohue: "When we are confined inside the dark house of suffering, may moonlight find a window."¹

In our Gospel story, Lazarus is confined inside a dark house—in a cave, a tomb. Suffering is all around. Mary is weeping. The people are weeping. Jesus is weeping with them. A great loss has occurred. It's hard to see the light, hard to know how moonlight could get into that dark cave.

We all have our dark caves. We all have places in our lives where it's hard to see the light, hard to know how to let the light in. Sometimes those dark places come when we lose someone dear to us, someone who made us who we are—part of All Saints' Day is remembering those people. Other times those dark places come from other changes or losses we experience, from difficult relationships, from burdensome secrets we carry, or from ongoing inner struggles with fear or cynicism or anger or shame. None of us is without a cave. No person we meet is without a cave.

The philosopher Plato has a famous allegory that uses the image of a cave to illustrate the human situation. Imagine that a group of people are stuck in a cave, imprisoned there with their backs to the entrance, chained so they cannot turn around. Light travels in from behind them and hits the wall they are facing, and behind them are puppeteers who are casting shadows against that back wall. All the prisoners know of the world is those shadows against the wall.

Then imagine that one of these people becomes unchained. He is able to turn and see that the shadows are not the whole story, that there are puppeteers causing them. He is able to turn and see that there is not only shadow to the world but also a great light coming from the mouth of the cave. He is able to turn and step out into that light and be perplexed and amazed by its intensity, by seeing colors and brightnesses that he has never seen before.

It's hard for him to go back and explain to the other chained prisoners what he has seen because they have no reference points for it. It's hard to explain color. It's hard to explain light.

I wonder if that is how it is for Lazarus in this story. He is confined inside his cave, his dark house of suffering. Then Jesus calls him out, tells the people who are weeping, "Unbind him and let him go." That's what Christianity is about. It's about another reality beckoning to us in the midst of this one, a reality that is hard to imagine when we are so used to watching the shadows on the wall.

¹ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space between Us*, New York (Doubleday, 2008), 15-16.

Paul the apostle puts it another way in 1 Corinthians 13: “Now I see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Christianity is about another reality beckoning to us in the midst of this one, a reality that is hard to imagine when we are so used to seeing in a mirror dimly, when we are so used watching shadows on the wall. It’s a reality that is beyond us and yet constantly breaking into our world, peaking in like moonlight through a window. This other reality, this world of light, comes to us in our caves, whether the cave is one we created for ourself or whether it is one there is nothing we could have done to prevent. And it’s a reality that won’t stop pursuing us until we are unbound and free and fully known. It’s a reality that asks us to help unbind and free and know one another.

When we read the Book of Revelation with its wild images of beasts and angels, of a lion and a lamb, sometimes it sounds like crazy talk. Even today’s words about a new heaven and new earth, about a holy city coming down from heaven like a bride toward her groom, about God dwelling among us and making all things new, these majestic words are not simple to understand. Maybe it’s because the author was trying to explain color or light to people who are used to shadows on a wall. Maybe it’s because the author caught a glimpse of another reality, a world of light, breaking into our world, peaking in like moonlight through a window.

My great uncle was someone who caught a glimpse of the light in spite of his challenges. He was the kind of guy who knew the Latin names of every species of dragonfly but had trouble getting his shoes tied in the morning. He was not religious in any traditional sense. Because of his quirks and rough edges, he became estranged from certain family members, and I never met him in person. But after he died, I went with my mom to his house to clean up his things—eclectic collections of old science books, a homemade printing press, and piles and piles of paper. While I going through one of those piles of paper, I came across a passionate letter to his friend Helen who was struggling with depression and found herself in a psychiatric hospital. The letter’s compassion struck me, especially knowing that my great uncle writing it was so complicated and often difficult himself.

He wrote to Helen, “Self-doubts, qualms, and difficulties of self-worth are mysteries that God sees fit to visit upon some of us. Such mysteries form shadows and darkness along roads that we have to travel, and light has to be made to shine into these shadows—either light of our own, light brought by others, or light from beyond. Looking for and finding light has to be a normal part of the journey. Otherwise, knowing that we have to travel the road, we find shadow and darkness growing and becoming fearsome and menacing...Your own light can do more good than you expect. Keep it shining, let me add mine, and always be ready to welcome that light that comes from the one perfect source where all is well.”

These words and knowing the complexity of the person wrote them, knowing that he too is one who had his caves, is a reminder that I see only in a mirror dimly when there is so much more to

people and to the world, when there is so much light out there to look for. As Christians, Christ is the light who we not only look for but who also looks for us, who calls us out of every dark cave, of every dark house of suffering, and says, “Unbind them, let them go.” As we heard the choir so beautifully sing, Christ brings the deep peace of the running wave and the flowing air and the quiet earth and the shining stars and the gentle night. This deep peace is one we know in glimpses and one we will one day know fully even as we are fully known. This deep peace is where our faith says our loved ones have departed to, and it is the peace where we trust we are headed too.

To return to John O’Donohue’s poem, he writes that “When we love, may the dawn-light lighten our feet. When we come to search for God, may we feel the rush of light spread slowly inside the color and stillness of the known world.”

In the next moments, we will have the opportunity to remember those we have loved. You are invited to come forward, take a white carnation, and place it in the vase on the altar, or give to an usher to place in the vase, as a way of remembering someone who has shaped you and as a sign of their lives still bringing life and light to the world. In doing so you are helping to set our communion table. These flowers on the altar will remind us that we common with people from all places and all times.

As you head back to your seat, feel free to take one of the papers in the basket which has a small feather charm and a verse from Isaiah. Feathers are a Celtic symbol of ascension and a reminder that “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

May we be lifted up on eagle’s wings, trusting in the love that is eternal.
May the deep peace of Christ, light of the world, be with us in this time and always.