

Meeting God in the Dark

1 Kings 3: 5-12 David and Solomon

How many of you have been to the Bissell Centre? Many of you have been there, or will know it. It's in those few blocks just near the main fire station on 96 St, where shopping carts loaded with bottles, clothes, sleeping bags, and damp pillows are lined up or grouped in an empty lot. Where people with straggly hair, dirty pants, and broken teeth sit or even lie down on the curb. Going through the front door, you may run a gauntlet of staggering, smelly, sometimes belligerent characters that may or may not try to bum a cigarette or a loonie as you open the door.

Who would not associate such a place with decay, despair, brokenness, ugliness? Who wouldn't react with fear or revulsion at the smell, the dirt, the unpredictability, and even frankly, the taint of death?

Now, imagine you are inside, walking across the lobby. One of the office doors is ajar, and as you walk past, you glimpse 2 men, one leaning forward in his office chair next to a cluttered desk, the other in the stiff backed guest chair, holding a poor excuse for a guitar. There is a rotary fan running behind the office chair, blowing past the guitar player, sending a waft of solvent smell into the hallway. The guitar player has mismatched shoes, jeans stiff with dirt, ragged shoulder length hair, and a distinctly grey pallor. He is playing his guitar, a bluesy tune with explicit lyrics and an ironic tone. The other man is rapt. Sometimes his eyes close, or he nods his head in time to the music, possibly in agreement with the words. Even from this removed vantage point, something is clear: this is a moment, a communion, a throat-catching point of unbroken connection. How could this be? How could someone so dirty, so rough and recently high on paint thinner, bring such joy to this other person, just sitting behind his desk in this awkward sanctuary of broken people?

How could a place of such pain and despair reveal this moment of joy, meaning, and belovedness?

Ah. Yes. How?

Could this setting, this story, be any further from a legendary Israeli king's bedchamber some 3000 years ago? It doesn't get much more different than that...

Where are the places that scare you? Here we are, the day before Halloween, we are witness to all manner of weird, gruesome, wild, and wonderful. Why do we do this thing, as a culture? Who would choose to walk through a haunted house, put on a freaky mask, watch a scary film? What does this say about us as a people?

Why would God appear to Solomon at night, in a dream, in the dark? It can be scary and lonely in the dark, and if we're honest, many of us would rather avoid dark spaces, dark experiences, dark times.

The night is also when dreams occur, when we rest, when we snuggle in bed (and maybe more!). It is also a creative place, a nurturing place. Think of planting a seed deep in the earth- it needs time in the dark before it can reach toward the light.

But, you see, God isn't just speaking with Solomon in that dream. God is speaking to us too, and needs us to hear and understand and learn now, today, at least as much as Solomon did way back then.

After spending time with the passage, I became aware of a pattern, a process, revealed in the experience of Solomon's dream conversation with God. It goes something like this: God appears to Solomon in a dream- at night, in the darkness, away from the bright light of day- and invites Solomon to ask for what he needs. Solomon's fear and vulnerability shine through at this moment: "I am only a little child, I do not know how to go out or come in..." but he is able to name his need, and ask for wisdom, or "a discerning heart," which God happily grants. And so Solomon gains his famous gift of wisdom. Nice story. Not the end of the story. Here is what I see:

Go into the night, into the darkness: into the place of risk.

Face what is scary, and name it.

Acknowledge our need for God, for the powerful mystery that is beyond human understanding.

Let go. Give it over.

And God will meet us there.

This pattern isn't only for Solomon. It isn't only in this story. It recurs over and over in scripture: go to the place of risk, of mystery, of darkness; become vulnerable and cry out for God; meet God in the darkness; become empowered to do what you are called to do. Look around and see where this pattern pops up.

I also happen to know some of the backstory to that scene I just described at the Bissell Centre. The worker had started in his position a few months previous, in the lead-up to Christmas. The Christmas lunch for his program happened to occur at the end of a series of crises for his program participants, and he was spent. Their need was so great, and there was not enough of him or anyone else to go around at this very difficult time of year. He finally locked up his office and headed down to the drop-in to join the festivities, but before he could join in, someone else showed up with a last minute request. As he re-entered his office, he paused, immobilized, depleted. Moments passed. A thought occurred: there is no way that I can fix everything. If I stayed here all night, there would still be someone else knocking on my door in the morning. I can't fix it all. I can't fix these people coming through my door. He took a ragged breath and started to sob. He sat down at his desk and cried. And cried. Then he got up, relocked his door, and went back down to join everyone at the party. After that, something shifted. He didn't try to fix everyone and everything. He found a way to be present to the person before him, as fully present as he could

be. And it was easy with someone playing the guitar as well as that guy we saw him with.

Of course, that man is my husband, Ron. I met him while working at the Bissell Centre, and one of the first things I loved about him was his ability to respectfully, generously, pay attention to the people he worked with. He finds the sacred in the outcasts, the broken, the abandoned and mistreated. It is Ron's gift from God, his calling, his grace. His joy in that guitar player in that moment was transformative, for them, but also for me. I saw the beauty in the midst of the ugliness, the light in the darkness, the seed of healing deep in the pain. God was present in that moment, and that moment sparked a love story, a relationship, a marriage, a family. What seems like a place of death is also the starting point for resurrection. Healing arises from transformed pain. What scares and repels us can bring us much closer to God.

-Go into the night, into the darkness: into the place of risk.

-Face what is scary, and name it.

-Acknowledge our need, our inability to manage on our own.

-Let go. Give it over.

-God will meet us there.

I recently read that "all great spirituality teaches about letting go of what you don't need and who you are not. Then, when you can get little enough and naked enough and poor enough, you'll find that the little place where you really are is ironically more than enough and is all that you need. At that place, you will have nothing to prove to anybody and nothing to protect." (Richard Rohr: Healing Our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer)

This is not the way of the world. This is not the way of late capitalism, in which the central message is consume, get, have more, and that unlimited growth- even at the expense of our well being and of our planet- is a fundamental right. This path is in direct opposition to the message of individualism, that we can do it ourselves, and that asking for help is a sign of weakness. This turned around perspective denies our deep need for relationship, that we need each other, that we belong in community and are not meant to be disconnected.

Richard Rohr, a well known Franciscan teacher and writer, wrote that "to become aware of God's presence in our lives, we have to accept what is often difficult, *particularly for people in what appears to be a successful culture.*" In so many ways, we at Robertson Wesley embody such a successful culture: we are a growing congregation instead of shrinking or even closing like so many others; we have enough money to support existing, even future programs; we are in a prosperous area; we have a positive reputation in the community; and for the most part, our membership is satisfied.

I wonder, what might be some of the difficult realities facing our community? If we as a congregation named our collective vulnerability in the quiet dark, what would it be? And would we be courageous enough to let that thing go, to stop trying to control the outcome, and let grace take root? How is God truly present in our community? Where is God hard to find? What is scary? What is hidden? Where are the signs of life in spaces

of death? And can we press into the place of death to find and practice resurrection?

So, what are we to do?

Well, "If we go to the depths of anything, we will begin to knock upon something substantial, "real," and with a timeless quality to it. We will move from the starter kit of "belief" to an actual inner knowing. This is most especially true if we have ever (1) loved deeply, (2) accompanied someone through the mystery of dying, (3) or stood in genuine life-changing awe before mystery, time, or beauty." (Richard Rohr)

So, we are called to "go deep". To the depths. To the scary, weird, uncomfortable shadowy night. Over and over. This is not a one-time thing! The more we face the deepest parts of ourselves and our community, the more we will live authentically, graciously. I am reminded of the process of coming out, for LGBTQ folks. It may be scary to face the very essence of oneself, but the alternative is a version of death, or even death itself. And the coming out doesn't really stop. It happens over and over, facing one's truth, taking the risk to share that truth, relinquishing control over another's reaction to that truth. We each are called to take that risk, to face the deepest, darkest parts of ourselves (and our community), and bring it into the light.

My final reminder, from the amazing writer Rebecca Solnit:

"Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go."

Amen