

INTO THE DARKNESS OF THE KINGDOM OF DEATH

In the Passion account from Saint Mark that we just heard there were two mentions of darkness. The first was Holy Thursday night. In order to appreciate fully that night it is helpful to realize just how much light pollution and ambient light there is in our modern age each night. It isn't until you get away from the big cities that you can actually look up into the night sky and see the dazzling array of stars. That Holy Thursday night was a moonlit night. But there are no electric lights. Jesus and the apostles are over on the Mount of Olives at the bottom of the Mount in what is known as the Garden of Gethsemane. The Garden with the olive press in it.

Except for what could be seen by the light of the full moon not much else could be seen. And we don't know if there was cloud cover that night. Also there would be thousands of Jews on pilgrimage to the Temple for Passover camping out on the Mount of Olives directly across the Kidron Valley. During the day, the Temple would loom large in their vision from that vantage point. But in the night the Temple Guards would need a guide to get them to where Jesus and his men would be. Judas could do that. Judas did do that. He betrays under the cover of night. Betrayal under cover of darkness still goes on to this day. We all know this. Some of us have done this.

But the second darkness was during the day. Mark says that from noon until three o'clock there was darkness over the land. Three hours of a deeply darkened sky at the height of daytime? Ever experienced such a thing yourself? I remember one time coming up from the shore in early Springtime the sky to the west got increasingly dark as it does when a thunderstorm approaches. But then the darkness increased, intensified. It was suddenly too dark. I got much more alert. I did not know what was coming but I began to grow alarmed. I started to think about tornados and what I would do if suddenly I saw one. It was very disconcerting and disorienting. I saw an overpass ahead and I pulled off to the side and stayed underneath it. Eventually the terrible storm subsided and it passed. I have never forgotten that day. The darkness lasted maybe twenty minutes.

But three hours? I am not a superstitious person and I grew very concerned because of the imminent darkness. Those who are superstitious would become really frightened. Even hard-bitten, calloused, rugged soldiers can lose it. Something very different was happening on that mount outside Jerusalem that day. Those soldiers were part of the crucifixion crew, the execution squad. Their job was to crucify people and to do it in a public way that prolonged the agony and the shame. They were hardened, seasoned veterans who had witnessed a lot of people die on the cross. But never anyone like this man. Never did they experience in nature what they experienced that Friday on Mount Calvary.

Jesus gives forth a loud cry and breathes his last. And then an amazing thing happens. The pagan Roman Centurion, the most hard-bitten veteran of all, says: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" There was as yet no resurrection. There was only excruciating death. And a man with a certain nobility, a certain humility, a certain integrity who endured til the end. Inspiring the cynical centurion to make one of the greatest proclamations of faith in all of Scripture: "Truly, this man was the Son of God!" That is what we believe. My friends, there is a lot of darkness all around us today. Let us hear this testimony of faith and add our own. Jesus we believe in You. Thank you for dying that we might live. May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.