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Belief and Trust

John 1:1-5 & John 14:1

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and
without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the
darkness did not overcome it... (Jn. 1:1-5 NRSV)

1 Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." (Jn. 14:1 NRSV)

1

In the wee hours of the morning before the dawn when fear threatens to squeeze the life out of you...God is there. In those moments when some form of homesickness comes over you like an ominous cloud...God is there. In those moments when your financial position seems impossibly bleak...God is there. In those seemingly endless hours when you feel alone, unloved, insignificant...God is there. In those hours when you sit helplessly watching an illness devastate a loved-one...God is there, too.¹

John, the gospel writer, in his Prologue said, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." There was a day when it did not occur to me how radical this simple statement really was. I took John to mean God sends a light the evil darkness cannot extinguish...a light that helps us see in the dark...a light that helps expose evil for what it is...or maybe a light that defeats the darkness. I identified the light God sends with Jesus...as well as the goodness of God shining through each of us and our neighbor and the stranger on the road and on and on. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," wrote John the Evangelist.

I have come to realize this means what it seems to mean at face value. But it doesn't just mean light shines **into** the darkness, like a flashlight shining into a dark room. No, the good news John's Gospel proclaims, the great revelation that has power to transform us, is that **the very darkness shines**.² Not just the light but the very darkness shines with the presence and promise of God!

The power of this conviction hit me like a stone upside the head. It may be a truth you have known for a long while - a truth that has comforted you in those dark hours before the dawn. But it was a new and revelatory truth for me. Let me try to explain what I mean.

I like knowing what is coming next - where the next meal is coming from and where I will lay my head at night. I like it when family and friends are healthy and happy. I like it when there are no power outages and the heating system keeps me just warm enough. I like it when my car runs smoothly and all the machines in my world do what they are meant to do. As much as I would like to be able to say otherwise...there is a level of vulnerability I prefer to avoid.

Ten years ago I was fortunate enough to spend two weeks walking a portion of the Camino de Santiago in Spain with my youngest child, Elizabeth. Trust me...it was not at

all like being exiled to the Gulag...and certainly nothing like being consigned to Dachau or Guantanamo. It was not like the forced march imposed by our government upon Native Americans in the late 1830s known as the *Trail of Tears*.³ Nor was it like it must feel to be one of the thousands of troops being shipped out to the Middle East as we speak!

For me to suggest the Camino was or is at all like these terrible things would not just be ridiculous...it would be inexcusable. The trials facing someone willingly walking the Camino or any of the other epic trails that traverse this planet are not typically of the life-threatening variety. And when I think of some of the trials you have faced in your lives and I have faced in my own life, the trials that arise while walking the Camino seem profoundly trivial by comparison. But God's lessons are not just packaged in worse-case-scenarios. They come packaged in the stuff of daily life...if we have eyes to see them.

Nevertheless, as I walked that pilgrimage trail in Spain there was a lurking sense in which I was unnerved by the uncertainty, the unknowns, of each new day. I knew that when the two-week walk was over Elizabeth and I would return home to our relatively safe world...and so I felt silly and ashamed about being anxious. It was humbling, indeed, to have to admit how attached I must really be to the comforts of home.

Then several days into the Camino before falling asleep I heard the passage from John's gospel in a way that was new for me. Darkness does not mean God is absent. The darkness itself shines with the presence and promise of God.

Could I **believe** what John said? At a much deeper level, could I **trust** it? Could I allow God's Spirit to help me set aside the darkness of my fears and learn to trust the God who is as much present in the darkness as the light? Could I entrust myself to the God of whom St. Paul wrote, saying that no form of darkness has the power to make God forget me?⁴

2

Christian Wiman is a 1988 graduate of Washington and Lee where I understand he spent at least some of his time studying poetry and playing tennis. After relatively brief teaching positions at Northwestern University, Stanford University, Lynchburg University, and the Prague School of Economics...in June of 2013 he became professor of the Practice of Religion and Literature at Yale Divinity School. That same year he published an insightful book, *My Bright Abyss*.⁵ Some title, isn't it..."My Bright Abyss." We usually think of the "abyss" as an impenetrable, bottomless chasm, a void, or a pit. The abyss he faced was not just a rare and deadly form of cancer but also the terrible treatments required to stave off death.⁶ For him a bone marrow transplant was successful and he is in remission.

That Wiman faced a formidable abyss is lamentable but not unusual. Every one of us have stood at the precipice of some abyss...toes curled tightly gripping the edge. We stood with trembling hands holding a version of bad news: a bad health report...news that a friend has lost her marbles...news that a child seems to be choosing a destructive path...news that we trusted an investment scheme that has failed and our life-savings is gone...news that a husband or wife doesn't love us anymore.

Peering into the vast emptiness in front of us there may be enough light for us to make out some of the trails and sharp edges. But what we can see soon fades into

darkness. Fear of the unknown grips us. What is down there? What will this next step mean? What lies ahead?

What I found arresting about Wiman's book was how he described the abyss. He called it his "bright" abyss. Was he saying: I cannot say with absolute, lab-tested certainty what lies ahead. I cannot say I will recover from my terrible illness. But I will trust God is there in the abyss ahead of me. I will entrust myself to the One who is as present in the darkness as in the light...the One to whom I belong in life and in death.

3

Jesus knew difficult times lay ahead for his disciples. Difficult times are a part of the human condition...and will not go away whether we have strong faith or no faith. But a strong faith can give us something to hold onto that can literally change the way we embrace the most difficult situations.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. **Believe** in God, **believe** also in me."

When Jesus spoke these words in the 1st-century, the word "believe" meant something much closer to what we mean when we speak of "trust." It would be silly to say anyone has trust in mind today when they say they believe UFOs exist or that there is a Lock Ness Monster. Who would ever put their confidence in such things?⁷

Jesus was not asking his disciples to look through a menu and say, "I suppose I can believe this or that..." He knew that in order for them to be able to face whatever abyss was around the corner, they would not just need to **believe** in God...they would need to "**trust** in God, and **trust** also in (him)."

4

You may be facing some form of darkness right now. The literal or metaphorical night in all its beauty and terror may be threatening to undo you.⁸ I cannot tell you the things that fill you with anxiety are unreal. I cannot tell you the things that face you will turn out as you wish. "Happily ever after" belongs to Disney tales not to real life. The struggle you face may leave you wounded and scarred the rest of your life.

What I want you to ponder, though, is the lessons we have learned from John's gospel. **First**, from the Prologue to John's Gospel where John said, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The very darkness itself shines with the presence, purpose, and promise of God.

The **second** lesson comes from the 14th chapter of John where Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. **Trust** in God, **trust** also in me."

If you let these promises shed light upon your anxious struggle, the nature of your struggle will change. And your anxious soul will be awakened by God whose love for you is boundless. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ See my 2019 Christmas Eve sermon – *Emmanuel, God With Us*. www.lexpres.org.

² Steindl-Rast, David & Lebell, Sharon. 2002. Music of Silence: A Sacred Journey through the Hours of the Days. Berkeley: Seastone Press. 21.

³ See: <http://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/trail-of-tears>. At the beginning of the 1830s, nearly 125,000 Native Americans lived on millions of acres of land in Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina and Florida—land their ancestors had occupied and cultivated for generations. By the end of the decade, very few natives remained anywhere in the southeastern United States. Working on behalf of white settlers who wanted to grow cotton on the Indians' land, the federal government forced them to leave their homelands and walk thousands of miles to a specially designated "Indian territory" across the Mississippi River. This difficult and sometimes deadly journey is known as the *Trail of Tears*.

⁴ See Romans 8:38-39.

⁵ Wiman, Christian. 2013. My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer. E-book edition. NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux Pub.

⁶ When Wiman was 39 and newly married, he was found to have Waldenström's macroglobulinemia, a rare type of cancer (he doesn't name it in the book) that affects white blood cells. After bone marrow transplant, he is in remission.

⁷ Williams, Rowan. 2007. Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief. Louisville: WJK Press, 5.

⁸ See the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.