



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Darkness to Dawn

### Psalm 13

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For many, 2009 has been a year to remember. However, for others, 2009 has been a year to forget. It has been filled with stress, uneasiness and many unknowns. It has been a year of worrying about jobs, the economy, health care and much more. 2009 may have been a year of worrying about your own health or that of a loved one. As you look back, it may have been a difficult year for relationships with friends and family. Many who are sitting in this sanctuary are glad to kick 2009 out the door and relieved to ring in 2010, hoping for a fresh start!

Some of you may be wondering why I have decided to use this stool this morning...well, let me welcome you to my self-counseling session in a large group setting. As many of you may know, I wear my emotions on my sleeves. Most of the time, you can tell how I am doing and what I am feeling by my facial expression. So if you will indulge me, I would like to share some of my struggles over the past year. This sermon really is not about me...at least that is not my intention. However, God has led me to share some of these struggles knowing that all of you have struggles of your own. I pray that this message will be helpful in some way.

During our spiritual journeys, we all experience the highs of mountaintops and the lows of the valleys. For me, 2009 has been a struggle through some of those spiritual valleys.

First, I must confess my relationship with God has often felt distant and ominous. It has been a journey through the dryness of a desert. I have lacked communication with God – having difficulty even knowing what to pray for. Many times I would find myself sitting in silence, not having anything to say and not hearing anything in response. My devotional readings have been sparse and mostly unfruitful. I would read passages and

devotional readings only to have no recollection of what I had just read a few moments later. Honestly, the fruitful times have been during the study of Scripture in preparation for ministry. It is when I have been preparing for sermons or Bible studies that I have noticed any fruit. I have just been spiritually dry for most of the year.

Interconnected with the spiritual dryness, I have found myself overwhelmed by ministry in 2009. As I have studied and examined the needs of today's adolescents, I have felt this incredible burden.

Many leading researchers of adolescents agree that all adolescents feel "abandoned" by adults in their lives and by society in general. Even as you look back at the last 50 years, more issues and stress have been put upon the adults in the American society. As more pressures have been placed on the adults, less productive attention have been given to our adolescents to help usher them into adulthood. Though our adolescents may face the same general issues as many of us adults faced growing up, the intensity of those pressures have been magnified exponentially and they have been given less tools to cope with the pressures.

On top of all that, society has placed seemingly insurmountable expectations on our adolescents. Just in the academic realm, colleges have increased their standards, causing high schools to increase expectations. It isn't enough to have good grades and decent SAT scores anymore. Students are now expected to have a list of extra curricular activities to demonstrate well-roundedness while volunteering hundreds of community service hours. In and of themselves, these are great things. However, when you put them on top of everything else

they have to deal with, they have created a level of stress and anxiety on students across the board unmatched by previous generations.

Over this year, I have spent many hours trying to figure out how to best minister to our hurting students. After much reading and researching, I've come to realize there are no easy answers to turn the tide to the systemic issues. It is going to take caring adults who are willing to invest their lives into our adolescents. It will take adults who will take interest in adolescents and become their friend and mentor. We need to recruit, equip and encourage leaders to reach out to our middle school, high school and college students. It will take families being resources for one another, helping and encouraging each other. It truly does take a village to raise a child into productive adulthood. As you might imagine, I've been overwhelmed with the scope of ministry to our adolescents.

Finally, in the past few weeks, I have come to realize that I have been trying to live and work outside of my limits. In her book *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, Ruth Haley Barton points out that most leaders have narcissistic tendencies that drive them to be successful in whatever they are leading. However, these are the same narcissistic tendencies that drive leaders to function outside of their limits. She writes:

"It is a very humbling moment in the life of a leader when we realize that we have taken on too much. It requires us to call into question the cultural stereotypes that venerate the rugged individualist who can do it all by himself. It challenges us to confront the grandiosity that got us where we are in the first place. And even when we do get around to admitting the problem, it might take even longer to do something decisive about it! We hold out as long as we can, unwilling to admit that we cannot do it alone, that there is something about our life that is just not working. At some point we are brought face to face with our human limitations. We realize that we are not the Energizer bunny. We cannot keep going and going and going. There is a limit."<sup>1</sup>

She goes on to list signs of living outside of limits. As I read through the list, I found myself checking off each one. Here are just a few off the list. First on the list is compulsive overworking. I can't seem to tear myself away from work. Second is hoarding energy. Realizing that there is not an endless supply of en-

ergy, I hoard my energy for certain parts of my life while neglecting to put forth energy in other important areas of my life. A third area is slippage in spiritual practices. We've already covered my deficits in this area.

Paul talks about limits in his second letter to the church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 10:12-17, he writes:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory. But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Paul knew the field God had given to him to work. He knew that he had a certain sphere of influence that he was to have and that he was not to go outside of those limits without God enlarging his field. Paul worked within his limits and gave God the glory for all things. In the same way, I have come to realize that I have been given the sphere of influence and a certain field in which I am to work in. I am to be faithful to my call of God and let God be responsible for the rest. Essentially, I have to stop playing God!

In today's text, David finds himself living in darkness. It obviously has been a long time since he has felt a touch from God. The first four verses of this psalm is a lament of all that is wrong with his life:

How long, O LORD ? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and every day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?  
Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;  
my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

"How long?" is a question we often ask. How long must we endure? How long will this difficult time last? David feels forgotten and frustrated. He is tired of living with daily grief. He seems to be at his wits end, seemingly unable to handle anymore and not seeing any hope on the horizon. He even feels as if the enemy will triumph if God does not show up soon. David was ready to give up.

Living in darkness (dark times) is not easy. Like David, we feel forgotten. We become frustrated by not knowing what to even pray for. We sometimes don't even know what has caused us to be in this state. We cry out to God and it seems our cries fall on deaf ears. However, if we can just step back from our pity party and see the bigger picture, we would realize that the dark times are parts of our spiritual journey. We don't live on the spiritual mountaintop. The hurt we feel are the growing pains in our spiritual lives. They are the results of the brokenness in our world. As James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." On the other side of the darkness is a faith that is a little more mature and complete. On the other side, we will be a better person for it.

So like David, cry out to God. Honestly tell God your frustrations and your hurt. Tell God of your loneliness. Tell God of your anger, even anger toward God. God is bigger than our hurts and our frustrations. God can handle our honesty. God, in the incarnation of Christ, understands our hurts and our loneliness. Christ has experienced the same emotions. God understands.

While walking through the darkness, it is hard to see the coming of the dawn. However, David seems to anticipate the light of dawn that is to come on the other side of the darkness. In the last two verses of Psalm 13, the tone changes from lament to hope.

But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
or he has been good to me.

David presents a calm assertion of his faith, even while walking through the dark times. David remembers God's past faithfulness. There seems to be a reaffirmation of his trust in God's sovereignty. He trusts that God's love is unfailing and that God's salvation is for now and forever. David rejoices in the promises and is willing to worship God through song.

Like David, in spite of it all, we are to trust in God's unfailing love and rejoice in our salvation. The common temptation when troubles last is to believe that they will last forever. When we get lost in our darkness, we think there is no end in sight. However, rest assured that there will be an end.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever." (Psalm 23)

No matter the darkness, I will rejoice in the Lord for God has been good to me. I am going to celebrate God's past faithfulness and goodness. Though I may walk through the valley, I know my Shepherd is guiding me each step of the way. I will rejoice and be glad in it!

Hurt, pain and frustrations are, no doubt, parts of dark times in our lives. When we walk through these dark times, there is no easy way out. Most of the time, there is no passage of Scripture we can read that will instantly bring us out. There is no magic potion we can drink. The valley is a difficult struggle and we don't have any idea when the light of the dawn may appear. However, we hold on to our faith by abiding in Christ, putting our trust in our God who will sus-

tain us through the dark times.

In 1871, tragedy struck Chicago as fire ravaged the city. When it was all over, 300 people were dead and 100,000 were homeless. Horatio Gates Spafford was one of those who tried to help the people of the city get back on their feet. A lawyer who had invested much of his money into the downtown Chicago real estate, he'd lost a great deal to the fire. And his one son (he had four daughters) had died about the same time. Still, for two years Spafford--who was a friend of evangelist Dwight Moody--assisted the homeless, impoverished, and grief-stricken ruined by the fire.

After about two years of such work, Spafford and his family decided to take a vacation. They were to go to England to join Moody and Ira Sankey on one of their evangelistic crusades, then travel in Europe. Horatio Spafford was delayed by some business, but sent his family on ahead. He would catch up to them on the other side of the Atlantic. Their ship, the *Ville du Havre*, never made it. Off Newfoundland, it collided with an English sailing ship, the *Loch Earn*, and sank within 20 minutes. Though Horatio's wife, Anna, was able to cling to a piece of floating wreckage (one of only 47 survivors among hundreds), their four daughters--Maggie, Tanetta, Annie, and Bessie--were killed.

Horatio received a horrible telegram from his wife, only two words long: "saved alone." Spafford boarded the next available ship to be near his grieving wife, and the two finally met up with Dwight Moody. "It is well," Spafford told him quietly. "The will of God be done." Though reports vary as to when

he did so, that belief led Spafford to pen the words to one of the English language's best-known hymns. Some say he wrote it on the ship to meet his wife, around the place where his daughters died.<sup>2</sup>

### **It Is Well With My Soul**

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

#### *Refrain:*

It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;  
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,  
Even so, it is well with my soul.

When I walk through the darkness of the valleys I will sing "It is well with my soul" for the light of dawn is near because God is good to me. ✨

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 103.

<sup>2</sup>"The Story of Horatio Gates Spafford," *Spiritual Thoughts for the Soul*, <http://www.angelfire.com/ms/spiritual/page16.html> (accessed December 22, 2009).



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