

When the Road Ahead Seems Dark

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint. and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. Isaiah 50:4-10

The winter of 1925 was terrifying for the residents of Nome, Alaska. After treating four cases of what appeared to be tonsillitis, the only doctor in town, Dr. Curtis Welch, came to a horrifying conclusion. The presence of extremely contagious diphtheria was confirmed. Without an antitoxin, the whole town of two thousand people and their surrounding native neighbors would likely be lost.

The problem was magnified because the shipping ports had been closed for the season. Aircraft travel was impossible, and worse, the diphtheria antitoxin could only last six days in the freezing temperatures of the arctic. The closest source of the drug was in Anchorage, Alaska, one thousand miles away. The Alaskan railroad could bring the medicine to Nenana, but Nome was still 675 miles away from there.

An important decision had to be made. The only known way to save the isolated residents was to deliver the serum by dogsled. A relay of twenty teams of dogs, each traveling thirty miles, was coordinated. When Wild Bill Shannon, the first dogsledder to go, left Nenana, the temperature was forty degrees below zero. He carried a life-saving thirty-pound package of serum.

For even the most experienced dogsledder, forty degrees below is brutal and risky. But with so many lives on the line there did not seem to be any other choice. He set his face to the biting wind and looked into the black darkness ahead. Wild Bill cried "Mush" and the dogs took off running. The clock was running on the city of Nome also.

The truth is, for all of us, there are times in life when the path ahead looks dark and difficult. There are times when we are not sure what direction to take and don't even know whether there is a solution. Perhaps it is when a series of tests has taken place and the diagnosis is not good. Perhaps it is the pink slip at the end of the work day. Dark times often come when we have lost someone that we loved. But it can be something much more common. We have much to do; we are stressed out; we don't know where to start.

There are times that we, like the dogsledders in Alaska, face a darkness that is frightening. How do we deal with this? Where do we find the strength to move forward?

First, we need to realize that the root cause of all of our problems is our separation from God after the fall. There was a time when mankind walked with God in the "cool of the day". There were no worries or concerns because God was near his human creation every step of the way. He talked with them like I'm talking with you now. But when sin entered the world, that kind of close relationship with God was broken. That has brought all sorts of problems and that has also brought all sorts of doubts. Note that this separation from God was taken by Jesus on himself on the cross. Matthew 27 quotes Jesus as saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God does not want close fellowship with sin.

Second, we should remember that God sent Jesus into the world to make it possible that what had been lost would be restored. And the path for Jesus was not easy. He was confronted by Satan in the wilderness. He was rejected by many of his own people. He was spat upon, mocked, and frequently criticized. That night in the garden, he cried out to God to take away the cup of suffering that he was facing. But know this. God was always near. And Jesus did what he was sent to do. He trusted in the promises of God the Father. He obeyed his Father perfectly and died in our place. There on the cross, by his atoning death, Jesus reconciled us to God and restored the relationship that had been broken. God confirmed that Jesus was who he said he was by raising him from the dead.

Our reading today from Isaiah 50 sheds additional light on our situation. This is the third of what are widely known as "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. Each of the songs paints a picture of one called the Servant. And with each song, one is likely to become convinced that the servant is Jesus, the promised Messiah, who came into the world to redeem the world. This, of course, was written originally for God's Old Testament people, hundreds of years before the Savior was even born.

Look at the description of the Servant in this song. In verses 4-5, the servant is depicted as one who sustains the weary and listens. In verse 5, we are told he is not rebellious and does not turn away from his mission. Verse 6 gives a strong description of the Messiah. He offers his back and cheeks to blows and does not hide his face despite his circumstances. What does he do? Verse 7 tells us that he sets his face like a flint. What does that mean? He accepted his sufferings willingly and moved ahead with determination. He knew that he would not be put to shame, that things would turn out all right in the end.

When the road ahead seems dark, this is the One we should turn to. He's been there. He knows what it feels like to face a dark road ahead. Jesus assures us that he is nearby to help us face and get through whatever challenges we have in life.

And he has some sweet promises for us. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) To the eleven disciples, concerned that he was going back to heaven after his resurrection, he said, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b) He instructs us that what God the Father did for him, he can do for us: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matthew 28:18)

One of the best sermons I ever heard was on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday. Jesus was dead. The disciples were in hiding. Christianity was stopped in its tracks. A great darkness had descended on his followers. It seemed that all was lost...but...Sunday was coming! That was the title of the great sermon I heard: "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming!" We shall all have our Fridays in some respect. But keep focusing on Jesus' promises. Our Sunday is coming also.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Gunnar Kaasen and his team arrived in Nome, Alaska. After the work of twenty dogsled teams, five grueling days, and 675 miles, the anti-toxins arrived into the hands of the doctor. The town would be saved. But it wasn't without a cost. A few of the dogs died, and a few of the dogsledders had severe frostbite. Today, the annual Iditarod race is performed to commemorate the accomplishment of this feat in 1925.

But for Christians, our great victory happened when the Servant sent by God broke through death and won eternal victory. He is near, and he has promised to help us. Thanks be to God, things will turn out all right in the end for us also. And we will have our own celebration in another place. Amen.