

Good morning. We're starting a Christmas series today called "A Thrill of Hope." That line comes from the song "O Holy Night." You know the song? It goes like this:

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

This is the start of a three-part series based on different lines in the song and I have the privilege of talking about how our world is *pining* in sin and error. *Fantastic*. Why are we starting here?

Fleming Rutledge writes, "The authentically hopeful Christmas spirit has not looked away from the darkness, but straight into it. The true and victorious Christmas spirit does not look away from death, but directly at it. Otherwise, the message is cheap and false."

We may not like beginning here. We like to rush into the holidays, rush into the baby Yoda wrapping paper, rush into the Elf marathons. But friends, if we rush too quickly, we'll cheapen what this season, *Advent*, is all about. The word "advent" comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival." During Advent, we celebrate the first coming of Jesus, born of the virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate. And during Advent, we await Jesus' second coming, when he will come again in glory to be our judge on the last day.

Of course, that elicits the question, "Why did Jesus need to come in the first place? Why does he need to come again?" Advent answers that by saying, "Jesus had to come because our world long lay *pining* in sin and error." Or, in other words, Jesus came and will come again because *life is dark*.

Some of you may be familiar with Thomas Kinkade's Christmas paintings (view the online sermon to see photos). Kinkade has actually received some critique for these. What do you think the critique has been? Wrong color palette? Brush strokes too harsh? Too *sad*? No, the critique of these is that they're not sad *enough*. They're *too* happy, *too* joyful, *too* cheery, *too* sentimental. They don't portray life *as it actually is*.

Why is this the critique? Because if you think about your life for two seconds you realize, "There's a lot of darkness in it"—sad moments, unhappy moments, upsetting moments, angry moments, and more.

As I was prepping for this message, I thought, "Ok, who are all the people that experienced or exemplified the darkness of life?" It was a long list!" In the Scriptures, dark things happen **TO** people:

- I thought about **Job**, who had money, a large family, abundant livestock, health, a thriving marriage, friends—but had it all ripped from his hands without any logical reason why.
- I thought about **Hagar**, Abram's servant, whom he and his wife Sarah used as a surrogate mother to have their child because they were unable to conceive. When she did bear them a child, Sarah grew jealous and "dealt harshly with" her—so much so that Hagar had to run off into the wilderness to escape the vitriol.

- I thought about **Israel**, a nation in Egyptian captivity for 400 years. They wandered in a desert to the Promised Land for forty years. Later their families were ravaged, their temple was destroyed, their warriors were killed, their Scriptures were thrown away, their names were changed, their diet altered, and their God was thrown to the wayside.
- I thought about **Jacob**, Abraham's grandson, who wanted to marry Rachel and worked for seven years to do so, but was tricked into marrying Leah, the uglier sister, and had to work another seven years to finally marry his love. Life IS dark!

Things happen **TO** people, but they also happen **IN** people. As just one example, I thought about **Lamech**, who was Cain's great-great-great grandson, a wicked man. Lamech married two wives—so, he was a polygamist—and he committed murder. Another man struck and wounded Lamech in some way, and Lamech killed him for this seemingly small offense. Afterward, he boasted of it all, saying, “Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.” You know this guy has darkness on the inside, not only because rage, revenge, and murder lay in his heart, but also because he talked in the third person!

So, the Scriptures portray darkness happening to people, a darkness residing in people, and, honestly, a darkness that just pervades the world **AROUND** people. One example again here—I thought about **Joseph**. Of course, early on his life was full of darkness—he was sold into slavery by his brothers, thrown in prison for being wrongly accused of misconduct, forgotten about in prison for a long time, wasting away. But then through a series of events he rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. What a turnaround! His life ends up okay, but that doesn't prevent darkness from descending. As time goes on a famine strikes. People are starving. His own family is hurting. The Earth itself is suffering.

The Scriptures show us that darkness is everywhere! Life. Is. Dark! And we feel this, don't we?

Things happen **TO** us all of the time. My girlfriend cheated on me. My husband lied to me. My friends betrayed me. My wife won't speak to me. My landlord upped the rent. My car won't start. I can't afford groceries. I lost my job. I lost my money. I lost my friend. I lost my dad. I lost my faith. I lost my boyfriend. I've lost my sense of self.

Things happen **TO** us. But like in the Biblical stories, things also happen **IN** us. To share honestly, there's darkness in ME. I was asked recently about humility and how I'm doing with it and how I know I can be humble, and I was like, “Trick question???” But I said I know to stay humble because I know in me there can be anger, impatience, harshness, cynicism, self-righteousness, vanity, manipulation, bitterness, envy, jealousy, hypocrisy, and more. My anger is shown when I want to slam on the horn when I get cut off, my greed is apparent when I want to tip 10% instead of 15%, and my deception is on display when I want to “accidentally” hit the lemonade lever at Chipotle when I know I opted for the water.

We binge stuff when we're lonely, we shop when we're empty, we drink when we're down, we boast when we're up, we're one person at work and another at church. We want *their* car, *their* home, *their* life. We despair, we grow angry, we lash out, we're passive-aggressive. Things happen **IN** us.

As if that wasn't bad enough, things happen **AROUND** us. There are dark realities that plague our own everyday lives. We hear people say things like I grew up with a dad who drank too much. My kids won't go to church anymore. My mom has dementia. My boss has cancer. My best friend lost a child. My buddy got divorced. We see war crimes in Ukraine. Censorship in China. Christians killed in Nigeria. Earthquakes in Nepal. Sex trafficking in Cambodia. Shootings downtown. Sexual harassment at colleges. And so much more!

Things happen **TO** us, **IN** us, **AROUND** us. As a result, we languish! We are like the last weary icicle, slowly melting away, holding on to hope even though spring is on the doorstep. It is as the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:22-23: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”

Because of Sin, the world, we, me, you are pining. Life. Is. Dark.

And, honestly, not to be a downer, but it’s (pretty much) always been that way. In Genesis 3, after God made everything *good, good, good, good, good, good, and very good*—everything changed. When Adam and Eve ate of the one tree they should not because of the deception of the serpent, because of the pride of their own hearts, they left the door unlocked for Sin to come and have its way. In came the darkness: deception, blaming, shame, guilt, shirking of responsibility, enmity, spiritual dislocation, pain, toil, anguish, despair, hard labor, and death.

Now, I share all of that to say this: the reality of toil and struggle and darkness happened on page 2 or 3 of the Bible. And I share *THAT* to say this: as darkness has (pretty much) always been a part of the human story, so too has darkness (pretty much) always been a part of your story and mine. From the beginning of our lives until our end, darkness will be a part of it.

From the beginning of his memoir *Telling Secrets*, one of my favorite Christian authors, Frederick Buechner, begins relaying this reality through the stories of his own life. He begins telling of a darkness from early on in his life: “One November morning in 1936 when I was ten years old, my father got up early, put on a pair of grey slacks and a maroon sweater, opened the door to look briefly on my younger brother and me, who were playing a game in our room, and then went down into the garage where he turned on the engine of the family Chevy and sat down on the running board to wait for the exhaust to kill him.” Life started dark for Buechner.

But then, it continued as he relays what happened with his daughter. He writes, “What happened...is that one of our daughters stopped eating. There was nothing scary about it at first. It was just the sort of thing any girl who thought she’d be prettier if she lost a few pounds might do—nothing for breakfast, maybe a carrot or Diet Coke for lunch, for supper perhaps a little salad with low calorie dressing. But then, as months went by, it did become scary.”

He goes on, “She got more and more thin...till she began to have the skull-like face and fleshless arms and legs of a victim of Buchenwald [which is a Nazi concentration camp].” He said, “No rational argument, no dire medical warning, no pleading or cajolery or bribery would make this woman...eat normally again.” This went on for three years until finally Buchner’s daughter was hospitalized and force fed.

And then, finally, Buechner writes about another season of darkness that happened towards the end of his life—empty nesting. He talks about how crazy it is that you spend 25 years with messy rooms, and extra little coats on the coat rack, and muddy foyers, and tales of adventure, and helping with homework, and slept-in beds and then—all of a sudden—emptiness. Emptiness in the house and emptiness in the heart. He says, “Any fool knows that when you have children, your whole life changes, but I was a fool who never realized the extent to which when you have your children no longer, your life changes again and almost more radically.”

You know why I appreciate him divulging all of this in his own life? Because it tells me that darkness in life is a part of life! It’s been around a while. It was there before him in his father, in was there in the situation with his daughter. And it met him in the form of a deep loneliness when he began empty nesting.

Is this not, in each person's unique way of course, the reality of every human life? Semblances of darkness from the beginning? Aspects of darkness until the end?

Life is dark! And it's (pretty much) always been that way.

And what's pitiful is that we can't create our own light.

Life doesn't go the way we want and what happens? We try to get rid of our darkness! We try to create our own light.

Some people look to therapy. People go to therapy and think everyone else needs to go to therapy and it's almost like there's this implicit belief that if they keep going and if everyone else kept going ALL the world's problems would be solved. Now, I have to say: I'm not anti-therapy. Therapy is a great thing.

I saw a meme one time that was like:

ME: I feel lost and hollow and directionless and like this city has no answers for me.

THERAPIST: Have you tried eating lunch?

I totally concur! It's good! But look to therapy and plot your genogram and do CBT and take the Enneagram all you want but you know what happens? There's still going to be unhealthy thinking patterns. You're still going to be triggered by that person. Even if you do manage to find your Zen place all throughout life, there's still the fact that one day, you'll die. Therapy will not save you.

Other people look to fitness. Lots of people do this one too. We lift, we run, we stretch, we swim, we watch what we eat, we push our bodies to the limits. Some people think that by doing so they can keep death and aging at bay.

But here's the thing: I can work out six days a week. I can avoid all sugary food. I can paleo to my heart's content—and I'm still at risk of getting so I can't work out like I want to or getting really busy at work so I can't eat like I need to. And ultimately, there's still the reality that with each passing second of the clock, each turn of the minute hand, every rotation of the hour hand, death approaches. Fitness will not save you.

Still others look to rationality. Some people *think* they can *think* through all their messing up in life, and their suffering and pain or the world's pain. Like, "If I can just *think* through my inability to stick to a budget, then I'll be able to overcome it." Or, "If I could just get people on the other side politically of me to just *think* through the issues, then we'd have world peace!"

But look to rationality and read all the right books by all the smartest people, live by Jordan Peterson's 12 Rules for Life, and learn all of Robert Green's 48 Rules for Power, and your worldview is still limited, you're still at the mercy of your phone ringing with news you don't want to hear about. And your thinking skills could degenerate until you can't really think cogently anymore as you slowly grow older and eventually you also die. Can't think your way out of that. Rationality will not save you.

Then, there's economics. Some people think, "Oh! If I can save enough, invest enough, plan enough, budget enough, note every penny, decide about every dollar, then I'll be good." More broadly, some people chalk the world's problems up to economic inequality. The problem isn't the human heart, it's the unequal distribution of wealth.

But look to the economy and financial planning and getting that emergency fund in place and you know you're really only as secure as last quarter. The economy could crash. Inflation could keep rising. Gas prices are out of your control. What if you lose your job? What if you get sued and lose?

And! AND! You will still one day die. Economics will not save you.

And lastly, some people look to politics. These people think that by voting the right vote, getting the right candidates in, getting the wrong candidates out, ridding our country of corrupt policies or systemic or environmental barriers to people's flourishing then the darkness will finally be overcome. But spend all your time lobbying for one candidate, watching their news, going to their rallies, donating your money to them, rooting them on to break down systems of injustice and you will still one day have to face the reality that you cannot prevent your candidate from dying. Politics will not save you.

And why is this? Why won't these things save us?

Well, it's as Isaiah reminds us: "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Paul reminds us that apart from God we are "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). Also, those apart from God are "darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Ephesians 4:18).

So, what do we do? How do we move forward? What hope is there for us?

There's a scene in *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* that is one of my favorite scenes. After the Ring of Power is destroyed at Mount Doom, Sam wakes up from his sleep surprised he is alive and surprised to see Gandalf. Then he says this: "Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

And isn't that the question? Will everything sad come untrue? Will my sadness come untrue?

In Matthew 4:16, we get the answer: "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

Notice what Matthew doesn't say. He doesn't say, "The people living in darkness have fashioned their own lights!" He doesn't say, "The people have gone out and *found* a light themselves." He doesn't say, "The people have become lights themselves!" No, he says, these people "have seen" a great light. He says this "light has dawned" on those living in the land of the shadow of death.

And this is the hope. Life is dark. It's (pretty much) always been that way. We can't create our own light. But a light has dawned!

Matthew is talking about Jesus! I don't know what your picture of God or the divine is, but the firmly Christian conviction is not that the divine is away, unaware of human suffering and bondage to the darkness, but that the Divine stepped into our brokenness, *your* brokenness, and offers light and life. As Jesus said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Or as John writes earlier about this Jesus: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5).

He did this by going to the darkest place: the cross. Because of this he brought Light into the deepest, darkest place. And now that Light is working its way out from the depths and will one day rid our world, your world, my world of all traces of darkness.

When I was in college, I worked for a little country church on the weekends. I taught Sunday school. I preached on Sunday mornings. (Watch the online sermon to hear the full story.)

This, my friends, is the gospel: a light has dawned in the darkness!

There is someone to whom the darkest things happened, there is someone who had no darkness in himself at all, and there is someone who looked out and saw the darkness around us and actually had the power to vanquish it. That person is Jesus.

No matter where you are, there is hope. A light has dawned. What darkness there is now will not last forever. Everything sad will come untrue. And for now, we wait and watch until the coming of our King when he will rid the world of darkness once and for all and we can join him in the New Heaven and New Earth where death shall be no more, where there will be no mourning, crying, or pain, where our agonies shall be turned into glories, where darkness shall be no more because this re-created world, “does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Revelation 21:32).