

9 March 2011
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Miraculous Darkness”

Text: Matthew 27:45

(Joel 2:12-19; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

During this Lenten season, our midweek services will focus on the miraculous events that surrounded Jesus' crucifixion. Tonight, as we plunge into the Lenten season with this day of black paraments and dark ashes, we remember the miraculous darkness that came upon the earth. Matthew reports that “from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.” Luke says that during those hours, “the sun's light failed” (Luke 23:45).

Think about that. One half of the earth was in the darkness of night, and the other half - from high noon until 3 pm, when the sun is at its highest and brightest - was covered by this miraculous darkness. The best way pagan historians that record this event could do was to speak of an eclipse. Matthew and Luke don't try to explain it, they just proclaim it. It happened. A deep darkness. An eerie darkness. An unnatural darkness. The message was clear: God was speaking a word of judgment against the spiritual darkness of this world - against this world's sin, unbelief, error, hypocrisy, sham, hatred, and idolatry.

Before this moment, the scene around the crucifixion seemed to be a veritable beehive of activity. Jesus had been tried and convicted. He was led in procession as a “dead man walking” through Jerusalem to Calvary. Women were crying out and mourning. At 9 am, Jesus is lifted up. He prays for forgiveness for those who put Him there. He hears the cry of the thief for mercy and proclaims the Gospel to him. He sees to His mother. The soldiers divide His garments. The chief priests and other Jewish leaders are complaining to Pilate about the sign he wrote. There's a lot of scoffing and mocking directed at Jesus.

And then noon arrived, the darkness descended, and it all seems to stop. We don't read of much more happening before Jesus bows His sacred head in death. It's as if the world had it's way for the first half; now it's God's turn. It is the hour of darkness, the hour of judgment. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46) You know the answer. It is on your forehead tonight. And we heard it proclaimed by St. Paul earlier: **[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that**

in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Tonight, and hopefully during the whole Lenten season, we take time out from the beehive of activity that is our lives, to stop and wonder at the darkness. To wonder at the depth and darkness of our sin - how truly deep and dark our sin is. But even more, to wonder at the love of Jesus who hangs in the darkness with the judgment of God against sin on Him. To wonder at His love that would cause Him to do this for me. And for you.

Think about this darkness, too, in the context of what we heard from St. Matthew tonight. He talks about doing our acts of piety **either** to be seen by others and to be praised by them when they see how good and holy we are, **or** doing them in secret - *in the darkness* - where it's not the *being seen* that's important, but the prayer, the giving, the love. ***For your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***

It seems to me that's what we see with the darkness of the cross of Christ. The greatest act of love that ever was, as Jesus lays down His life for the life of the world, is shrouded in darkness. In the darkness of sin and judgment, the perfect, spotless Lamb of God offers Himself, and ***His Father who sees in secret*** - who sees what is happening in the darkness - ***rewards Him***. Jesus dies for the sin of the world, but is raised to life and glorified on the third day.

And this reward He now gives to us - in the forgiveness of our sin, in the promise of eternal life, in the gift of His Spirit. And having received this reward, we do what we do as Christians not so the praise of the world will be directed at us; but that our Father in heaven and our Saviour be glorified and praised. Or as Jesus said: *that your light will shine before others [in the darkness!], so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 5:16).

So tonight, we do as we heard in Joel. ***We blow the trumpet, consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, and gather the people. We consecrate the congregation, assemble the elders, and gather the children and infants. To return to the Lord our God. For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*** We gather to repent and confess our sin. That I have not loved the Lord God above all things. I have not loved my neighbor as myself. I have lived as if God did not matter, and as if I mattered most. I am a poor, miserable sinner. And the word of Jesus from the cross is spoken to me and you: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34). For truly, we don't know what we are doing! The true depth and horror of our sin.

But tonight, we also do Joel one better. For whereas Joel said: ***Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?*** We know! For Christ our Lord has left a

blessing behind Him, an offering to eat and drink - the offering He offered to the Father of His own Body and Blood. This He now gives to you for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. To strengthen you to shine in this world of darkness. To live a new life of hope, peace, joy, and light.

How do you know? Well, let us listen once again to what Matthew told us: "from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the earth **until the ninth hour.**" *Until the ninth hour.* And at the ninth hour, the time of darkness was ended. The light came back; the sun shone again. Imagine what that must have been like! But it did, for all was now finished (John 19:30). Three days later the resurrection proved it. But already here, we see that it is true. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:5).

And dear Christians, the darkness cannot overcome you. It may get pretty dark in this world of sin, and in your life. But baptized into Christ Jesus, into His death and resurrection, the darkness cannot win. The righteousness of God has been given to you. You are His. It is finished. Thanks be to God.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.