

12 September 2021  
Pentecost 16

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Broken Darkness”  
Text: Mark 9:14-29

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

Where were you on 9-11? Twenty years ago yesterday. Some of you remember that day very well; will never forget where you were, what you were doing, the first images you saw, living through that day and the sad and difficult days following. For some of you, those events took place in cities far away from where you lived; distant. For others, it was close; in your backyard. Some of you can't answer that question because you weren't born yet! No matter. You've been effected, too. 9-11 effected us all. From the wars fought since then, the lives lost then and since, the extra security we've had to live with since that day. 9-11 was a dark day.

But we sang today: *Praise the One who breaks the darkness* (LSB #849)! That darkness. Your darkness. All darkness. Praise, that is confess, that is tell everyone what Jesus did to the darkness and all the powers of darkness. *He broke them*. They seek to break you; Jesus broke them. They seek to subdue you; Jesus subdued them. They seek to rob you of all hope; Jesus came to give you all hope. And He did so by coming and entering our darkness. Jesus didn't just shout advice from afar, from heaven. A divine pep talk. A spiritual rooting section. No, He came down. Into this darkness. And He conquered it. He conquered the darkness by allowing the darkness to engulf Him. He dies. He dies in the darkness. For the sun would not shine on God on the cross. And yet in such deep darkness the light of His love and mercy never shone so brightly. That our God would do this for us. For you. And then when Jesus rose from the dead, the *praise of the One who broke the darkness* - the darkness of sin, the darkness of death, the darkness of hell - went out into all the world, shining the light of His forgiveness, life, and salvation for all.

Jesus gave a foretaste of this victory in the story we heard in the Gospel today. For the father in this story, this was just the latest in a long string of dark days. For his son had a spirit, an *evil* spirit, a demon, and apparently for quite some time. It convulsed him. It threw him into fire and water. It disabled him. And the father had to watch his son suffer like this. Fathers are supposed to help their children, protect them, provide for them! Yet what could he do? He was helpless. No mention is made of a mother, his wife - perhaps she had already been taken from him, making this darkness even deeper. His wife taken. His son taken. He would gladly have traded places, suffered the affliction himself to set his son free. The very thing, actually, Jesus had come to do for us.

But this, too: *what about the boy's darkness?* What was he forced to go through each day? Did he have good days and bad days? Was he aware of what was going on? Did the good days make the bad days that much worse, dreading when they would come? Did he live in fear? Did he beg his father for help? Did he wish to die so he could be free from this torment? This was deep darkness for the son as well.

*And what about the crowd?* Were not they, too, in the darkness? Surely, they feared the darkness; the power of what they witnessed. And the fear that it could happen to them, or to one of their loved ones. And the scribes just made it worse, sowing the seeds of doubt and confusion, and instead of bringing the clarity of God's Word, they argued with the disciples and the crowd.

Into this darkness Jesus stepped that day. He had just been transfigured, that moment of him shining like the sun, and speaking with Moses and Elijah. And while that was happening *up there*, this was happening *down here*. Was this the devil flexing his muscles while Jesus was pre-occupied in His glory?

Well, yes and no. The devil may have been flexing his muscles, but Jesus was not pre-occupied - this is exactly what He had been talking to Moses and Elijah about in His Transfiguration! How He was going to break the darkness - this darkness! - with His exodus; with His death and resurrection. How He would be the Son destroyed to set us free. Free to be sons of God. How He had been cast into the waters of baptism to be cast into the fire of God's wrath, to have compassion on us, to help us. This darkness saddened Him more than the father, the son, or the crowd. So He came to break it. He came down from heaven. He came down from the Transfiguration. He went down all the way to the darkness of death and the grave.

The disciples couldn't do it. They had cast out demons before in the name of Jesus and with His authority, but this one they could not. We're not told why. Was this some kind of super demon? Did they forget how to do it? Or was this, too, to teach us, that ultimately, there is only one who could break the darkness. Only one who could die and rise. Only one who could crush the serpent's head.

The father turns to Him. That's good. That's faith. But he's not sure. Would Jesus have compassion? Would Jesus help? *Could* Jesus?

**Those are your questions, too, aren't they?** In your darkness. For you're in it, too. *What is it for you?* What is your darkness? Is it some sin committed against you that has plunged you into the darkness? Is it some sin that possesses you, that you cannot seem to shake? Is it a broken home, a broken marriage, a broken friendship? Is it doubt? Is it uncertainty? Is it sickness that has burdened you for a long time? Is it persecution? Is it fear? Fear born from a tragedy? Some other kind of fear? Fear maybe not for yourself,

but like this father, for your children? These days with what they are learning in school? What is their future? What's going to happen next in our culture and society? Who they will marry? Will they remain faithful? *What is it for you?* What is your darkness? Even if others think it nothing, it is something for you. And more than something. And those questions . . . Will Jesus have compassion? Will Jesus help? *Could Jesus? Deep* darkness.

Or go back to 9-11 . . . how about the darkness of that day that endures? The darkness of the anger, bitterness, and hurt of those who lost loved ones that day. The darkness that holds fast to their hearts. Can they forgive? Or will these demons continue to make them foam at the mouth in rage, drown them in hurt and despair, and burn them up with the fire of anger and resentment? Can they forgive? Can you forgive? Is there healing from the darkness?

It may not seem possible. The darkness seems so powerful, so deep, so wide, so high, so overwhelming. The father didn't know. So, Jesus, *if you can* . . .

*If you can?* This is the very reason Jesus was standing before him! This is the very reason why God came in the flesh! To have compassion and to help. To break the darkness with the light of His love, forgiveness, and mercy. ***All things are possible for one who believes.*** Because one who believes *has Jesus.*

***I believe; help my unbelief!*** the father cried out. And we cry out. We who believe, who confess, who trust, yet we struggle, too. And those questions . . . *Will He? Can He? For me?*

Well, what did Jesus do? He spoke and set the boy free. Which is what Jesus does here as well. For you! He speaks and sets you free. He speaks forgiveness to free you from your past, from ALL your sins. He speaks promises to free you from your doubt. He speaks comfort to free you from your despair. He speaks truth to free you from your confusion. He speaks encouragement, He speaks faithfulness, to strengthen you in your weakness. He speaks - and His Spirit comes through those words to work in your hearts the faith and hope you need.

Because as long as you live in this world, you will both believe and not believe - not what you probably wanted to hear! But you will not be free from your sinful, fallen, unbelieving flesh until you die and join Jesus in His resurrection. And then there will be no more unbelief, no more sin, no more darkness - only joy, peace, light, and life.

But until that day, Jesus does in fact have compassion and is here to help. To break the unrelenting darkness, to comfort your accusing and terrified mind and conscience, and to raise you to life now and forever through His Word. His Word made flesh and His Word proclaimed. The two always go together. The mistake some people make today is that they want Jesus without His Word because, well, they like Jesus but they don't really like

what's in the Word, the Scriptures. But it doesn't work that way. The Word made flesh and the Word proclaimed go together. And it is that Word *that broke, and is still breaking the darkness.*

Interestingly, after Jesus spoke and set the boy free from this unclean spirit, the boy looked dead. He wasn't though. And maybe where the Word is spoken today it seems dead - that the church is dying, that the Word isn't working. But it is not so. The boy was alive and the church is alive, and the Word is working. Don't be deceived. Believe the words and promises of God and rely on them. The words of your **Baptism** which say you are a child of God. And you are! The words of **Absolution** which say you are forgiven. And they are! The words of the **Supper** which feed you with the Bread of Life Himself. Words that are solid and sure, steadfast and reliable. Don't argue like the scribes about what you think or what seems true to you. That only brings more darkness. The Word alone brings light, and clarity, and peace.

And this, too: *pray*. Isn't that an interesting addition Jesus adds at the end of this story? That this kind, this kind of darkness, is driven out by prayer. So as we live in this darkness, pray. Pray for those stuck in their own darkness. Pray for those who have trouble forgiving. Pray for those who are doubting and struggling. Pray for those stuck in the darkness of habitual sin. Pray for our world, our culture, our society. Pray for our leaders - in both the church and the state. Pray for Jesus to come and shatter the darkness once and for all. Like the disciples, you can't do it. But Jesus can. And did. And does. And will.

So where were you on 9-11? I don't know the answer for all of you, but this I know: **Jesus was on His throne.** We may not understand why this happened, why the darkness was so deep that day, why evil continues still today - even in us and to us and from us. But the death and resurrection of Jesus means that the darkness cannot win and that the day of resurrection is coming; that your sin is forgiven and you have a life that death cannot end. And as deep as they darkness may get here - whatever it is for you - it cannot change that.

So *Praise the one who breaks the darkness.* Praise, that is confess, that is, proclaim His death, rejoice in His forgiveness, and live in hope as you come and receive His victorious Body and Blood. As He comes here, down here, into your darkness, and gives you His victory. The darkness did it's worst, and lost. The victory belongs to Jesus. Then. Now. And forever.

What is your darkness? ***Lord, I believe . . . I do! I do. I really do . . . help my unbelief!***

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.