

The Dawn in Our Depths

- Homily
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- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Each summer we Jesuits withdraw from our ministry in order to make an eight-day retreat. In fact eight of our community are on retreat right now. I made mine back in Gloucester, MA looking out on the Atlantic Ocean. A retreat—in my words—is taking the time to come home to the heart, the truth of yourself, and there in those depths to find the sanctuary of the Sacred, the place of encounter with God, and to abide there in faith, in prayer, in praise, in gratitude, in love, and in call. This year I came to realize and to experience what I call “The Dawn in Our Depths.” For me it is the resurrection of Jesus and the dawning of my own resurrection in him. I believe each of us has a “dawn in our depths”, a source of the sacred within what is truest and deepest in us, some unquenchable hope or joy or promise or life which dawns in our depths and gives light now to our lives and assures a fullness of light for ourselves, others, and our world. The dawn in our depths is a sacred hopefulness which enlightens life no matter how dark or threatening it is.

Today’s scriptural readings show us three persons who are prophets in most threatening even violent times and yet each draws on a rootedness in God, a faith, a dawn in their depths which allows them to live out their call courageously and to bring light to others.

The prophet Jeremiah is mocked, laughed at, derided, reproached for his message of violence and outrage against an unfaithful people. He says, “I will speak no more!” But then he experiences what is like a burning in his heart, a fire in his bones, and he cannot hold it in but must speak courageously amidst all the threat. This is the dawn in his depths. Jeremiah is the prophet who says:

“Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside waters that stretches out its roots to the stream, it fears not the heat when it comes; its leaves stay green; in the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit.”

Jeremiah is rooted in God, speaks from being planted by the stream of God, against all violence and mockery or resistance acts and lives out of the dawn in his depths. There’s one prophet.

St. Paul is another prophet presented to us, who in spite of lashings, stonings, rejection, hatred, imprisonment, envy, ridicule, and exhaustion proclaims the good news that Jesus is Lord, risen from the dead, that Jesus lives in us, that our lives are hidden in him, that our joy for our fellow Christians is unbounded. The dawn in the depths of Paul was that he had encountered in real life the risen Lord, really seen and known him, and had been transformed by Christ Risen. The dawn in his depth was the light of the resurrection which assured the universal resurrection and the transformation of the world. Nothing could quench or snuff out this dawn in this second prophet.

The third prophet is Jesus himself. He is shown setting his course toward Jerusalem where he will be rejected, will suffer, and will be put to death. Nothing will stand in the way of fulfilling his call, his mission, not even the protesting of Peter, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you! It will, it must, and Peter must get out of the way. So here’s this third prophet: the same kind of rejection, mockery, ridicule, violence, threat, hostility, even torture and death. What Jesus draws on, what the dawn in his depth is, is the will of God, his Father, his Abba, dwelt in and found and accepted during long nights and days in prayer, and knowing in faith that somehow the Father is bringing about his kingdom of light for all people and for this earth itself through Jesus, and that Jesus, the faithful son, is himself to be the kingdom’s dawn. This dawn in the depths is earth-changing stuff for prophets.

48 years ago today Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech to the massive crowd of the March on Washington for racial justice. He was 34. He too was a prophet in the midst of the same kind of violence, hatred, ridicule, rejection, mockery, imprisonment. His life too would lead to death at the age of 39 at the hands of hatred and violence. He tells us in his speech what the dawn in his depths is, what he draws on. Citing the prophet Isaiah he says:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places plains, and the crooked places will be made straight and the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together.”

The dawn in the depths of this Baptist minister was the same light of the kingdom which led Jesus to Jerusalem. Giving the name to the monument which was to have been dedicated today in his honor—but for a hurricane named Irene, which ironically means “peace”—he said in that speech about the vision of the kingdom:

“This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the mount with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

And he tells a restless crowd and us, “Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.” “Soul force”...they are his words for what I have been calling the dawn in our depths. Martin was true to this soul force to the very end of his life, saying in his very last days:

“I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up the mountain. And I have looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land. And I am happy. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord.”

At the end, for Martin the dawn was becoming light, becoming day.

Jeremiah, Paul, Jesus, Martin—and we could have just as clearly spoken of Abraham Lincoln who looked over Martin’s shoulders—all threatened, all courageous beyond measure, all going all the way, all put to death, all prophets, all able to do what they did because something in them that is also in us and enables us to do what we are called to do.

The dawn within, the light in us, the unexplainable hope, the fountain of faith, the stream of life, the sacred in the depths of the human person is not given to some and withheld from others. It is given to all of us, is within us, is dawning in our depths. Jeremiah, Paul, Jesus, Martin, Abe they are lanterns on a lampstand or a mountain, so that we too might see how to live from the light within us, trust it, be humble in its presence, be courageous because of it in the face of whatever is threatening or dark around us.

In conclusion and to reflect on in silence, to live from the dawn in our depths asks for several things:

- to stand as much as we are able to know it in our own truth,
- to allow the revelation of our scriptures to enlighten us from within,
- to pray to God from this truth, and light,
- to come together into faith communities like this one in order to be renewed in and to share our light
- to believe in, acknowledge, protect and stir up the light in others,
- to live as people of hope and joy, knowing the dawn is already here and the day is certain.