

Fourth week of Lent 8-14

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© written by Rev. Wim Vermeulen

Introduction

Nice to meet you all again, both from Scotland and the Netherlands! Welcome to our fourth Bible Study in this series on Lent. Let's start with listening to a song from Taize 'When the night becomes dark' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJUIqheBLzI>

which will be closed with these words of prayer: "Within our darkest night, O Lord, we pray you, kindle in us a fire that never dies away. In the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen."

Setting the scene

In today's reading we face the traumatic experience of *darkness*. All four evangelists do their best to show that the crucial events in Jesus' death took place ***in the dark***. The betrayal and trial took place literally at night, but at the moment of Jesus' death an inexplicable darkness descends, even though it is noon. Many have tried to find a natural cause for this event - a "planned" solar eclipse, for example - but a regular solar eclipse never completely darkens it and usually only lasts a few

minutes. Furthermore, a solar eclipse can do not take place at the full moon, and the Jewish festival of Passover is always celebrated at the full moon. Others have suggested a desert storm. Indeed, a desert storm can quite darken the sun, but Passover falls in the wet season and sandstorms are then very unlikely (Keller 2011, 234)¹. So, this must have been supernatural darkness.

In the Bible, darkness during the day is seen as a sign of God's judgment. See, for example, Isaiah 13: 9-10 ("The day of the LORD dawns in fierce wrath.... The stars in the sky are no more light, constellations are extinguished, the sun is darkened when it rises...") and Jeremiah 15: 6-9 ("you left me, says the Lord . (...) Therefore, I raise my hand and I turn you down (...) the sun goes down in broad daylight) the strongest example is of course Ex. 10: 21-23, the ninth plague in Egypt: "The Lord said to Moses: Stretch out your arm toward heaven, and darkness will come upon Egypt, a darkness so dense that it is tangible. Moses stretched out his arm toward heaven, and then all Egypt was shrouded in darkness for three days. For three days the people could not see each other and no one could take a step... " In the light of all the above, we have to conclude that something of a judgment is happening here. But who is judged and why and how?

¹ Timothy Keller, *Kings Cross – The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*, New York 2011.

Bible reading Mark 15, 33-41

³³At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). ³⁵When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." ³⁶Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. ³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. ³⁸The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" ⁴⁰Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

Question to ponder on?

1. Have you ever experienced any kind of darkness in your life? How did it make you feel?

Reflection

In the Bible, God is regularly compared to the Light or the Sun. Imagine a world without sun or light. That is impossible to imagine. No life is conceivable without light. The first creative act of God is the creation of light (Gen. 1,2). Without light we are totally disoriented and isolated.

Now, besides literal darkness, the Bible also speaks of spiritual darkness. As human beings we can also live spiritually isolated and disoriented. When we put something outside of God at the centre of our lives, we suffer a loss of identity. Our identity becomes fragile and insecure. We become dependent on, for example, people's approval or depending on how well you do or can-do things. Mental disorientation also leads to isolation from other people because we are increasingly afraid, angry, proud, or full of self-pity. Guilt consumes us from within. Without God's intervention, we would all still be in this spiritual darkness. We all know the temptation to worship an idol or idols. Since humanity was on a wicked path toward total disintegration, God intervened miraculously on the cross. Christ sank into the darkness to which we were heading. God judged himself so that we can live forever in the light and presence of God.

How do we know that it worked? Mark tells us that two things happen after Jesus dies. The veil in the temple is torn, and a Roman soldier makes a quite remarkable confession of faith.

The veil was the curtain that separated the most sacred part of the temple from the rest. The veil meant: a person cannot get further than this. God is inaccessible to humans. If the curtain rips, that will change. Mark says: it tore from top to bottom. He means: This is what God did. The torn curtain is an invitation: the way is open to draw near to God. You are welcome in His presence!

Then the words of the Roman soldier. The words of the Roman soldier expressed in his confession "Truly, this man was God's son!" is a memorable one. Throughout the gospel the question is, Who is Jesus? But this answer has not yet been given by anyone. That it is a Roman who comes up with this answer is all the more remarkable. Romans assigned the title 'Son of God' to their emperor. But this Roman soldier says it about the dying Jesus! How did he come to this revelation? It must have to do with the special death of Jesus. You have to imagine that a Roman soldier was regularly part of an execution. In some way, a crucifixion was nothing

special to this man. Yet this death must have been unique. Because of the circumstances (darkness) and because of the *way* Jesus died.

Contemporary lesson

The Christian faith is the only religious faith which says that God himself has suffered. But what was that good for? Not many spectators around the cross had a good answer to that at the time. Only later (after Easter!) they started to realize that what they witnessed had been the greatest act of love, power and justice in history: God's salvation. In every human life we know all kinds of suffering that seems pointless. Maybe currently you are having a traumatic experience of darkness. You search in the dark about how and why. It seems pointless. The cross will in any case, show this: even in the deepest suffering, God is not absent. The evil and suffering is like a shadow which passes away. The deepest darkness and death have been overcome by Christ. This is the heart of Christian hope.

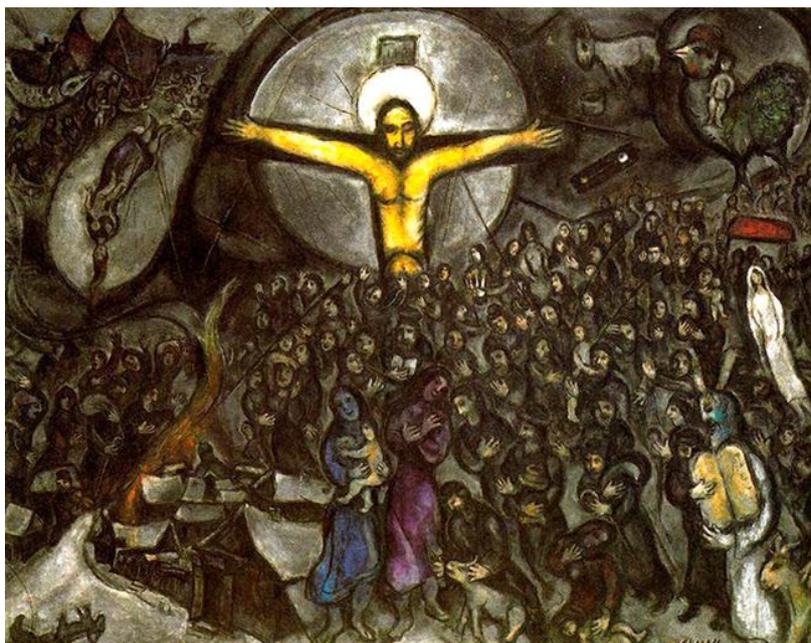
At the end of part three of *The Lord of the Rings*,² as evil and darkness almost seem to win, main character Sam describes what he thought at that time: 'Between propelling clouds above a dark peak high in the mountains saw Sam a white star shining. The beauty of it touched his heart when he out of the desperate land looked up. And he got back hope. For as an

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings part III, the Return of the King* quoted in Keller, *Kings Cross*, p. 245.

arrow, clear and cold, insisted the idea to him that the Shadow eventually was something small, something passing. There was light and high beauty which was always beyond its reach. For a moment his fate no longer troubled him. He shook all fear of them off and fall himself in a deep, undisturbed sleep.'

Questions to yourself

1. What sentences from the reflection would you like to talk about in your group?
2. In what way have you experienced that God has saved you from any kind of darkness?
2. What do you think of the quote from *Lord of the Rings*?
3. Look together at Marc Chagalls painting *Exodus* below. What catches your eyes and why?



Prayer

Lord our God, Thou who died in darkness, we thank You for opening the access to yourself. We thank you for being the Truth, the Life and the Way to the heart of the Father. We pray You, illuminate in our hearts the darkness that surrounds us. If we have to struggle with suffering which seems pointless or meaningless, give us the confidence that You are with us. With the roman soldier we praise You as the true Son who reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and evermore. Amen.

Hymn "Abide with me"/ Blijf bij mij Heer

Blijf bij mij Heer, als 't zonlicht niet meer straalt.

Blijf met mij, Heer, als straks de avond daalt.

Als vrienden henengaan in stormgetij,

blijf Gij ter hulp gereed, o blijf met mij.

Wat is hier blijvend, dat het hart verheugt,

ach, nimmer geeft ons d'aarde blijvend vreugd.

Alles snelt henen, glorie gaat voorbij;

maar Gij, die niet verandert, blijf met mij!

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;

Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;

In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.