

LIGHT OF LIGHT
Randall Tremba
December 14, 2008
Third Sunday in Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. May those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. **Psalm 126:5-6***

* * *

This past Monday a military jet crashed into a San Diego neighborhood. The jet had lost both engines in flight. The pilot followed emergency protocol doing all he could to guide that disabled plane as long as he could to minimize impact. And then he ejected.

The plane crashed into a house killing a grandmother, a mother, and her two daughters—every member of the family except the father who was at work. In a flash Dong Yon Yoon lost his entire family. One of his daughters was 15 months old, the other 2 months.

None of us knows exactly what that feels like and most of us can't come close to imagining such shock and horror. But some of us can get pretty close.

Yoon's world was devastated, not unlike the devastation that some of us have felt at certain times. His life like some of yours will never be the same. There will be days when he will feel, as some of you feel from time to time, *as good as dead*, the life and light drained out of body and soul.

In such a time, who or what can help?

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to provide for those who mourn a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. **Isaiah 61***

The Greek work for "anoint" is *Cristos* from which we get the word *Christ*. Jesus was not the first or the last to be anointed with the spirit of the Lord. Maybe you've met others; maybe you've been one. In a dark time long ago the angel Gabriel asked a certain young woman to bear the light of the world. We too have been asked. In darkened situations, the anointed arise.

Yoon is not the first person to be crushed, broken, and sent plunging into despair. The world has been a vale of tears from the beginning. If it's not one thing it's another that knocks a body to the ground and leaves it for dead.

This past Monday, the sun, moon and stars fell out of Yoon's world. The earth beneath his feet collapsed. There was no place to stand. He couldn't get his head above water. He couldn't breathe. The light in the heavens was gone. Creation had turned back on itself.

That is a baptism of sorts, not the ceremonial version, but the real thing, a total immersion into the depths of the sea. One self dies; another arises. Or doesn't.

I baptize you with water, said John the Baptizer, but among you stands one you do not know.

John 1

On Monday the world came undone for Yoon. But somehow that badly broken man stood up and offered grace to the world.

The world can't get enough of grace. Nearly everyday entire families are killed in a flash—and not all by accident. We hear of bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan. We hear of massacres in Darfur and the Congo, to name just a few places where unrestrained violence is witnessed and reported to the outside world. Much more doesn't even make the news. And then there are the lives and communities devastated slowly.

On Monday Yoon gazed upon the cinders of what had been his home and family. The next day near the crash site, he asked the world to pray that the terribly distraught pilot would not suffer for he is, Yoon said, "one of the treasures of our country."

How does a person stand up and offer a blessing after his family has been destroyed? How can a man see light after all the lights of his world have fallen? Perhaps it's because there's a presence within and among us that we rarely see except in the dark.

"I baptize with water, but standing among you is one whom you do not know."

That one, as it turns out, is the light of light that descends into the dark places of our soul and world.

Light is a curious thing even though it is not a *thing*. Light is not one thing among the many things in the world. Light is no thing at all. Light is real but mysterious. It illuminates all things and places without being any of those things or places. And to think: it is the Light of light that invites us to follow and learn the ways of love.

How can a person breathe again after devastation? Perhaps it's because there's a breath in this world that never leaves or forsakes us even in the darkest hour. It's a spirit embodied in ordinary human beings. Hear this from the prophet Isaiah *600 years before* the birth of Jesus.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. And they shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

On Tuesday that father stood up in the ruins of his life, stood up in the darkest moment of his life, the way we as persons and as a nation stand up from time to time. Yoon stood up; but he did not stand alone. He was surrounded by members of his faith community, brothers and sisters who will walk beside him through the long and deep valley of the shadow of death, the way we at times have walked beside broken souls, the way we have been accompanied in our own long hard journeys.

Every soul makes that journey, some more than once. The only way through the valley is with a companion. Companionship doesn't eliminate the pain or the darkness. But it does make the path and the pain bearable; the rough places a little less rough, the obstacles less steep and the pitfalls less deep. It's how we prepare the way for love. The mountains are brought low, the valleys raised up, the rough places made plain.

In just a few moments we will partake of broken bread. At the heart of the word "companion" is the word for bread. You can hear in the word *panini*. *Pani* is Latin for bread. *Com-pani*, or companion, means "one with whom we break bread."

On the darkness night of his life under the shadow of death, Jesus gathered with his companions and broke open his life. What else can you do?

This simple meal may seem small, ritualistic and even trite. But the faithful practice of this meal week after week after week is the one thing, the one practice that has enabled the community of the Beloved to survive through the darkest times for thousands of years.

This community meal is both extraordinary and ordinary. I used to think it was meant to be special and therefore infrequent. But lately I've been wondering, wondering if it's really meant to be that special or that rare. Perhaps it's meant to be a common practice, as common as prayer, as common as hospitality, as common as companionship through the dark valley, as common as welcoming the presence of Christ, the light of light in every moment and every place. A mysterious yet real presence.

It's not that the bread and wine are *magical*. It's that when a community of broken souls gathers in the name of love, the light of light descends and brings us to a place that words alone cannot reach.