

The land of deep darkness

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We expect Jesus to emerge from John's shadow in a public way, to take on the establishment and lead the charge for God's reign. Instead, when John is arrested Jesus withdraws (Matt. 4:12). He slips away to the margins, to the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, off the radar of popular consciousness.

Jesus' strategy runs counter to the inclinations of the mainline church. We habitually locate in safe neighborhoods, keeping the troubles at bay. Jesus goes to the land of deep darkness, the place where despair overwhelms easy optimism.

Pastors stumble into this land from time to time. It is a fearful place, just beneath the veneer of the everyday, that is revealed when we find the courage to host the ragged ache of frightened, wounded lives. In this region of the soul the tired clichés and well-worn illustrations from our preaching files have no effect. It takes courage to be hospitable to untended pain here, because this is a dark place for the pastor too.

Matthew tells us that the gospel of God's kingdom come begins when Jesus survives the wilderness temptations and travels to the land of deep darkness (Isa. 9:2; Matt. 3:16). This must be good news to preachers and congregations who find themselves in the dark these days, for Jesus is close at hand. Admitting that we're in the dark is a truth-telling turn that enables us to glimpse the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. We've been imagining that it is up to us to fix everything, to develop the right programs, to turn things around, to make a success of the religion business. We've pretended that we know what needs to be done and said. We've covered up our fear of the foreboding future with tips from the latest book or seminar. We find it hard to tell the truth, to give honest testimony, to say that we live in a land of deep darkness. And yet it is truth-telling that turns preacher and congregation away from a preoccupation with saving the church and towards Jesus.

In the darkest places, the gospel comes first among the last and least. To our continuing surprise, the kingdom of heaven is closest to those who face the fact that they are not capable of lighting the darkness. Jesus does not begin his ministry with a church that is confident in its capabilities but with a people who know that they are in trouble. It makes one wonder. Might the troubles and losses caused by the sidelining of the mainline church be Jesus' doing after all? Is Jesus seeking to call his church out of the land of deep darkness and cure it?