"If I ever become a saint, I will surely be one of ‘darkness’ – I will continually be absent from Heaven, to light the light of those in darkness on earth."¹ When these words and others like them were published two years ago they caused a worldwide scandal. They caused media frenzy. Pundits who know little or nothing about religious experience were pontificating wildly about the hidden apostasy of one of the world’s most respected and honored religious leaders: Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997).

When her diary was published in 2008 we were given a window into the heart of an extraordinary person. But what provoked scandal was not her faith, but her doubt, her prolonged seasons of disbelief. That was a surprise. But it’s only a surprise to people who know little about what it’s like to experience God. It’s only a surprise to people who pit belief against disbelief or doubt. It’s only a scandal for those who think Christian faith is about, well, faith, having 100% faith and trust, 24-7, instead of knowing the Christian experience is really more a participation into the very depths of God, a participation that includes both faith and doubt, both light and darkness. Mother Teresa’s loss of belief should not have provoked worldwide astonishment, “but be seen as a salutary maturation toward deeper belief.”²

Faith and doubt go hand-in-hand, one suggests the others. It’s like the way we experience light in its relation to darkness. It’s the same way our experience of presence and absence complement each other. To experience the absence of someone we love is at the same time to evoke a memory or feeling of his or her presence. To experience the presence of someone we love is to evoke the possibility of what it might feel like to experience his or her absence, their loss. Absence and presence are fluid. One induces the other. One is found in the other. One evokes the other.

We really shouldn’t be surprised by any of this, including Mother Teresa’s disbelieving darkness, because we have it modeled for us, demonstrated for us right here in Matthew’s account of the crucifixion. It’s all found in Jesus’ experience on the cross.
If we view Jesus as both fully human and fully God at the same time, then Jesus’ experience of the cross, his reality tells something about what it’s like for humans to undergo an experience of God. It also tells us something about what it’s like for God to undergo human suffering. We learn something of how a human being can and does experience God. We discover something of who God is when we look upon Jesus’ life – especially on the cross.

And for a time, at least, we find Jesus, we find God in darkness. “From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.” Yes, I know there are places in scripture that says “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).” And, “In him was light and the light was the life of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1: 5).” These verses are from John’s epistle and gospel. He loves to play light off of dark. There’s no account of darkness at the hour of Jesus’ death in John’s gospel. John tells us the darkness could not overcome the light, instead, God’s light shines in darkness. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree: Jesus reigns as King of the Jews from a throne enveloped by enduring darkness.

God is not afraid to enter into the dark. Indeed, Jesus’ experience moves God right into the darkness. God moves Jesus right into the darkness. Why? We can’t be sure, of course. But maybe because there will be no place where God will not be God. There will be no part of creation, even darkness itself, which is the very opposite of God’s glory, that will not be redeemed, darkness itself will be forced to yield new life, new possibility. Remember what the psalmist cried, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” Then the psalmist insists, “…If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139: 7-8, 11-12, emphasis added).”

There’s a sense that the darkness contains, encloses the event of the cross and yet the cross actually makes a space for darkness in the heart of God, at the center of God’s being. It was the poet, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), who marvelously captured this insight into the nature of God when he wrote in his mystical Four Quartets:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God….

And then in the heart of God’s darkness comes Jesus’ cry of dereliction, his anguished cry of abandonment, abandoned by God. He’s lost in the dark with God nowhere in sight.
This is not the cry of an atheist, of course, denying the existence of God. But neither is it outright theism. It’s something in between. He’s crying out to an absent God whose absence invokes a presence, the very object of his cry. Instead of seeing it as an expression of doubt, it’s really an extraordinary act of conviction, a demonstration of what a mature faith looks like. Crying, “My God, My God” – indeed, holding God accountable for this experience of abandonment, asking, “Why have you forsaken me?” That’s what it’s like to be human in relation with God.

Just as darkness is absorbed into the heart of God, so is this cry of dereliction. Jesus struggles with this very human response to the absence of God. God makes space for such a cry. Such a cry can become an extraordinary cry of confidence in God. Light shining in the darkness.

What this means for us is that our cries in the dark, our cries of protest, our cries confessing the absence of God have a special place in our experience, in our relationship with God, because we hear them in Jesus’ words on the cross. His cries are our cries. Our cries are his cries. His cries are known by God; our cries are known by God. They don’t go unheard.

At the beginning of James Joyce’s (1892-1941) novel, Ulysses (1922), a question is asked, “What is God?” To which the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, answers, “A cry in the street.” Whenever we look to the cross, we have to pose this question, “What is God?” From the cross we can say, God is “A cry in the dark.”

This is the hope that the cross offers us (at least one part of its hope). All this talk about darkness can be, well, dark – I know. It can be depressing. We don’t want to hear this, we don’t want to go to those dark places, and we resist it. We can’t live for long in the dark without light, without hope. This reflection might make us uncomfortable or maybe it’s foreign from your experience of God. However a theological reflection upon the darkness of the cross is essential to a mature faith. Why? Because then we might be better prepared when darkness inevitably overcomes us or when someone we know and love enters into a dark and lonely place and we wonder how God could be in such a godforsaken place. There are people this night, members of our church family who are asking precisely these questions. This reflection is necessary because then we might have something to say.

These are the things I think about, personally and pastorally, as I try to reflect theologically upon my own encounters with darkness and when I see people I love and care about experience the isolation that comes with pain and suffering, where God is nowhere to be found. If God can’t be found in those dark places, then the God we worship
when all is light is not worthy of being worshipped, is not profound enough to be known in the depths of human pain and suffering. The God I see in Jesus Christ is the God of the depths, who in love risks going into the depths of human anguish and pain and shines in the darkness. The Welsh, Anglican poet, R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) speaks of such an experience of God in this confession that resonates with so many and speaks to me:

> For some
> it is all darkness; for me, too,
> It is dark. But there are hands
> there I can take, voices to hear
> solider than the echoes
> without. And sometimes a strange light
> shines, purer than the moon,
> casting no shadow….⁶

Jesus’ cry in the dark makes a place for our cries. It’s the cry of human anguish inflicted by a world that refuses to love, of humanity that refuses to love, of humanity that refuses to receive love. All of our tears are contained in his cry in the dark. As King David once said, “In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I called. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to came to his ears (2 Samuel 22:7).”

The cry of anguish is never left unheard by God. As we have seen and will see, the cry of anguish is never the last word.

---

2 Kearney’s comments, 56.
3 “God has always been exposing the divine life to the strange annihilating nothingness that emerges from the creation of freedom God gives it. …the cross is more than a disclosure of [a] journey of pain; it is the furtherest point to which a God of love can go – that is, to the uttermost depth of alienation and estrangement.” Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).
5 Cited in Kearny, 110.