

3.17.2019 Lent 2 (Matthew 15:21-28)

C.S. Lewis suffered through many difficult, very painful events in his life. His mother died of cancer when he was a young boy, he was sent away to a boarding school that had an abusive headmaster who was later declared insane, he was wounded in World War I and though he pleaded with his father to come visit him in the hospital, his father never did. The most painful event, however, was the loss of his wife, Joy. The two of them were first married in a civil ceremony in 1956, and after Joy was diagnosed with cancer less than a year later, they were married by an Anglican priest.

Shortly after this second ceremony, Joy's cancer went into remission. She was able to progress from being completely bedridden to almost normal walking, and the next two years were filled with great happiness. Joy made the comment: "You'd think we were a honeymoon couple in our early twenties, rather than our middle-aged selves," and Lewis echoed her thoughts by saying that he experienced later in life the married bliss that most people experience in their early years, but sadly, it didn't last. By late 1959, the cancer returned, and Joy died in 1960 after just four short years of marriage. Two of the last things she said were, "You have made me happy," and "I am at peace with God."

The loss of his wife plunged Lewis into the depths of grief and pain. Following Joy's death, he kept a private journal detailing his thoughts as a kind of personal therapy. These private thoughts were later published in a book titled: *A Grief Observed*, which offers an intimate look into the darkness, the doubt, and above all, the sense of distance and abandonment from God that Lewis experienced. An experience that the 16th century Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross, refers to as the "dark night of the soul." In his private journal, Lewis wrote, "But go to Him when your need is despicable, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence."

By the grace of God, the clouds of grief gradually lifted and C.S. Lewis emerged from the dark night of the soul with renewed faith in the depth of God's love. It's important to note that Lewis is not the only person to face

such a trial. Since St. John of the Cross put a name on this experience, many Christians have reported their own dark night of the soul in varying degrees. The most well-known may be Mother Teresa, who in a letter described her own dark night this way. She said, for fifty years, that she endured “such deep longing for God, so deep that it is painful, a suffering continual, and yet not wanted by God, repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal.” These heart-wrenching words were written by a saint whose faithful example has led millions of people to a closer walk with God, yet who struggled with darkness for the majority of her life.

Too often “name it and claim it” mega churches portray the Christian faith as flawless people, living happy lives, filled with continual private revelations from God, but in the stories of C.S. Lewis, St. John of the Cross, and Mother Teresa we hear the lonely cries of the psalmist: *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”* (Psalm 13:1). *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest”* (Psalm 22:1-2).

Have you ever been plagued by painful feelings of distance, even abandonment from God? If you have, clearly you are not alone. The heroes of our faith have struggled with the same feeling of emptiness, that God had left them alone, or that the “heavens were like brass” bouncing back any prayer sent upward. Our Gospel lesson this morning tells the story of a woman who had such an experience, and in her example we find the best way to confront the dark night of the soul is through a faith that is humble and persistent.

The woman in this passage came to Jesus asking only for mercy. She didn’t seek happiness and prosperity, but in great humility *“cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David”* (Matthew 15:22). She cried out to Jesus with all the pain of a mother whose daughter was *“grievously vexed with a devil”* (15:22) and was suffering in uncontrollable agony, but the passage reveals that Jesus *“answered her not a word”* (15:23). He not only ignored her cry, His disciples asked Him to *“send her away”* (15:23) because her crying was annoying them. When Jesus finally spoke, His words were not the comforting response we’ve come to expect, but instead *“He answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of*

Israel” (15:24). As you know, this Canaanite woman doesn’t belong to the house of Israel. She’s a descendant of an idolatrous nation that God commanded Israel to destroy in the time of the Old Testament (Joshua 9:24). Still, in the face of such rejection, she continued her plea for mercy. She came, and she worshipped Him. She fell down in front of Jesus and said, “*Lord, help me. But He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs*” (15:25-26).

This desperate Canaanite woman, like C.S. Lewis, St. John of the Cross, and Mother Teresa, knew what it was like to feel abandoned by God. As we heard from Lewis, “But go to Him when your need is despicable, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.” A person may even argue that this woman’s experience was far worse than the dark night of the soul, for she could see Jesus when He *answered her not a word*. She heard him clearly when He referred to her people as dogs. So, how do we reconcile our Lord’s apparent lack of compassion and mercy with the truth that “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). How do we reconcile a feeling of being abandoned by God with our Lord’s promise: “*I will never leave you, nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5).

This Canaanite woman shows us the way. When Jesus said, “*It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs,*” she responded in faith, and said to Him, “*Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table*” (Matthew 15:27). From her first cry for mercy to the last word that she heard from Jesus, this woman accepted everything that came from Him with humility and faith. She wasn’t angry with God when He seemed to ignore her. Instead, she came to Him again, and worshipped Him. She didn’t seek to be God’s equal by pridefully arguing her opinion of right and wrong, or by telling Him what she deserved. Instead, she humbled herself under God’s mighty hand, casting her cares on Him, knowing He cares for her (1 Peter 5:6-7).

The Canaanite woman answered her feelings with faith. She believed in her heart that “*the Lord is full of compassion and mercy*” (James 5:11), confessed with her mouth that “*Jesus is Lord*” (Romans 10:9), and pressed on in a faith grounded in a good and loving God regardless of her feelings,

her circumstances, and all the evidence that seemed to suggest otherwise. In her faithful cry we are reminded of the words that Job spoke about God during his affliction. During his own dark night of the soul Job said, *“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”* (Job 13:15), and in our Gospel passage Jesus responds to that type of unwavering faith by saying, *“O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour”* (Matthew 15:28). In the end, Jesus, who often scolded His own disciples for their weak faith, praised this Canaanite woman for her great faith, and healed her daughter.

In our Gospel reading and in the dark night of the soul, we discover this truth: Those whom our Lord seeks to honor, He often humbles. When we consider the faithful examples of C.S. Lewis, St. John of the Cross, Mother Teresa, Job, or this Canaanite woman, what we find is that each of them, to use the words of St. Peter, were *“grieved by various trials”* (1 Peter 1:6-7), various trials that kept them humble and tested the genuineness of their faith. *“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble”* (James 4:6). A prideful heart will not tolerate the mysterious, sometimes painful ways in which God works, but the humble poor believe that even crumbs which fall from our Master’s table are precious gifts, the very Bread of Heaven.

In the desperate cry of the Canaanite woman, we hear our own Lenten appeal: *“Have mercy on me, O Lord... help me.”* In this season of repentance, prayer, and fasting, Lord have mercy upon us. Help us answer the trials and sorrows of this life with unwavering faith. Help us confront the dark night of the soul with fervent, persistent prayer. Help us defeat the temptation of pride with a humble heart. O Lord help us to turn every painful, discouraging circumstance in this earthly life into just one more reason to place our whole trust in You, to worship You, and to praise Your Holy Name.