

**Through Lands of Deep Darkness**  
**January 26, 2014**  
**By Pastor Laura Hehner**

So you're sitting on your couch. Your friend of seven or eight years is next to you, about halfway through their second glass of wine, or beer, or tea, or whatever it is they prefer.

...You've had a nice night together, talking about all sorts of things....

...eating some tasty foods. Listening to old favorites.

...It was good catching up.

Then your cell phone goes off.

You pick it up to see why you've been interrupted

by that sound effect you once loved enough to use as a ringer,

and now *despise* because you've heard it enough to count as a form of torture.

'What is it?' they ask.

Looking at the reminder-message on the screen, your throat tightens, just a little.

You're not sure you should tell them.

After all, you know their views on God and Jesus aren't the same as yours.

You know, that in fact, they've mentioned a few times

before just how disillusioned they are with the church, and organized religion as a whole.

Despite all of this, in that flash of an instant, you decide to just have out with it.

"It's um... ... It's just a reminder

that I have an outreach meeting tomorrow night, at the church."

You look tensely over. NOTHING. Not a word.

...You're used to this, and just hope the awkward moment passes as soon as possible.

But then they put down their glass. They look at you earnestly,

adjust their throw pillow, and turn to face you.

...Uh oh.

“You’ve been at that stuff for a long time, now, huh?” They mention. “Must mean a lot to you.”

You tightly nod your head. “Uh... yeah. I guess so.”

Quickly, you correct yourself. “I mean. Yeah. Definitely. It means a lot.”

“Why?” they ask simply, their glass definitely now looking half empty rather than half full!

They’ve never asked you about your faith, before.

You always just let it go, and be what it was, and now you have *no earthly* idea what to say!

“What makes you do all of that church stuff, anyway?” they continue.

“...What is it you believe, that makes all of that time you spend over there *worth* it?”

You swallow (hard!), take sip of whatever it was you were drinking, and do your best to *dive in* without smacking belly-first into the depths, and turning this rare chance you’ve been given to share your faith, into a painfully embarrassing FLOP.

Another scenario:

...You’re sitting at a traffic light...

(We all know where *this* I going, right? Ugh. All been there.)

A man is holding up a tattered cardboard sign.

“I’m a Christian man with three children. PLEASE HELP,”

are the words written in faded sharpie across the front.

You already rolled up your windows and locked your doors five blocks ago,  
because lame Google Maps blindly took you through a real shady part of town  
just to get to the museum.

You look anxiously to the seats in your empty car.

No one's with you in need of protection, but yourself.

...No excuse, there.

You look to where you keep your wallet---in that quiet corner of your mind,  
just hoping that while you're considering all of this, the light will turn,

And you'll have to drive off before you can do anything anyway---

---Your morality still safely in tact, because you were *\*thinking\**  
about doing something to help, but were stripped of the chance!

...You find your wallet. The light's still red.

Sure you don't have anything in there, anyway (---because who carries cash, anymore?)

You thumb through the flap, and find a five dollar bill.

The light's *still* RED!

Hesitantly, you pull the paper from your wallet,

take a deep breath, and roll down the window.

Our call as Christian people leads us into some *\*really\** uncomfortable places,  
sometimes, huh?

And it gets way worse than the two examples I just mentioned.

*Far* more dangerous places than these. ... Those are just the casual ones!

Dear Lord!

I briefly listed a few, last week, as we started into this sermon series

about what it means to answer God's call into Servant Ministry.

Those were in barely even the *intermediate* level of risk, too.

Right now, I'm trying to decide on where to go

for my Volunteer in Missions trip for ordination;

And just the other day, I found myself going through the list of options.

In some, I was thinking, well...

... there's a lot of problems with drug wars, there.

Considered another: well, there's a lot of problems

with seriously deadly *disease*, over there...

...Problems with fundamentalist terrorist groups over *there*...

And then, of course, the truth of the situation gently reminded me in my heart...

... Look, dummy... there's nowhere you *should* go.

There's nowhere God's help is *needed*, that doesn't have significant problems.

---That doesn't have an element of danger involved, in being there!

Missions Trips: on the moderate level of risk. Not even there, at the top.

Whoever says being a Christian is taking the easy way out,

doesn't know much about Christ or what Christ asks of the people who choose to follow him.

If we're doing it right---and by that, I mean REALLY doing it. Not just *thinking* it.

If we're blessed enough to find something inside

which will give us the strength to actually *live into* our beliefs,

rather than just agreeing with what Jesus said.

(---because there's a huge difference, remember!)

Than we'll find ourselves in awkward, uncomfortable,

*dangerous*, moments and places...more and more the further we walk down that path.

As I mentioned before, today is the second Sunday

of our sermon series on what it means to be in ministry for God.

--What it means to answer that silent but unspeakably LOUD call from God, to follow.

.... So let's look into our scripture reading, from Matthew, chapter 4:

(Matthew 4) 12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum [cuh-PER-nay-uhm] by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun [ZEH-byoo-luhn] and Naphtali [NAFF-tuh-lye], 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- 16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned." 17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Now, as we look into this passage, it's important for us to know a little background:

This "Galilee of the Gentiles," was a region controlled by Herod

(not such a good guy!), who we read had just arrested John the Baptist.

The light of God's peace definitely doesn't shine there, quite yet.

This region formerly known as the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali,

is the place where Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel

had fought their wars so "nothing important" was disturbed,

and it was a place which later became the target of "ethnic dilution campaigns"

of one conqueror of Palestine after another.

---The point of those "campaigns," being to keep the languages and cultures there

mixed enough, and oppressed enough,

to where not one of them would have the strength or the urge to resist the new overlords.

This is why this place was known to Isaiah as “the land of deep darkness,”

and why it still had that nickname in the time of Jesus.

...And the place continued living up to its ancient reputation.

Herod, like his namesake who ruled at the time of Jesus’ birth,

was known for over-extending his power.

And a classic example of this was what happened with John, as we read in these verses.

John the Baptizer lived and worked primarily in Judea, not Galilee.

But in his preaching, he was openly critical of Herod’s immorality,

and though Herod had no jurisdiction over John,

he had John arrested, jailed, and later, *beheaded* in Galilee.

Not a good place---definitely nowhere someone would choose to vacay (as they say).

But Jesus goes there, anyway. ...

And the wording from scripture is a little misleading.

It says he “withdrew” from where he was, to head to Galilee.

This almost makes it sound like he wanted to “escape” from where he’d been, to a safer place.

Definitely not the case. Jesus, in the moments just before these, was actually in the wilderness,

---going through his experience of being tempted in the desert--- before he “withdrew.”

Also not a safe place! But he was heading from one wilderness into another.

He wasn’t running *away* from a dangerous situation, but only toward a different one.

And he goes to that land of deep darkness for two reasons:

The first, is to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, which Matthew mentions in verse 15.

And the second---just as important---he heads that way

precisely *because* John has been taken to a dungeon, there.

Because it is not a safe, or comfortable place to be.

...And if light is to shine in deep darkness, this is exactly where Jesus must go.

In this reading from Matthew, Galilee becomes the “home base” for Jesus’ public ministry

not just because an old prophet said so,

but because the people there, governed by a man like Herod

(who sought so viciously to silence John), desperately needed some good news.

More than most, they needed the company, and support,

and strength of God to hold them up, and see them through.

Ok... So there’s that. Moving on to verse 18:

18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

This one kind of explains itself, right?

Jesus, in that land of deep darkness, passes by those people who would be his disciples,

And he says “follow me.”

And immediately, they drop everything. The writer of the gospel uses the word twice.

For Peter and Andrew, Verse 20: *Immediately* they left their nets.

For James and John, Verse 22: *Immediately* they left their boat and their father.

They leave behind their livelihoods. They leave behind the comfort of family.

And they walk from the sea which is their home

and the only real source of support for their lives,

And follow Jesus into the dirt. Into that land of deep darkness,

to share and spread the light of God as far as they possibly can from there,

with whatever God's put inside of them to give them the strength and ability.

Going back to that moment of Call, we talked about last week.

---The people Jesus walks by, are pulled ahead by that undeniable draw of God.

When every fact surrounding their lives tells them to run---far away!---at the sound,

Their hearts have no choice but to move in the direction God's leading them.

And there is no real room for regret. No looking behind.

I'm sure you've found yourself in that moment,

when you're doing something you'd rather not do....

--Standing in a place you'd rather not be standing....

All of the sake of standing up and speaking for God. *Doing* for God.

And though you might wish in one of those deep corners of your mind

that God had never led you to do it,

You know there's no place you'd rather be

than standing right there, feeling God all around you,

As you do whatever you can to help other people feel that Spirit of Life, too.

And though you might be tired. And though you might be scared.

---Though you might feel vulnerable, and exposed,

and even beaten down by the very ministry you're living into as a servant of God,

You know that there is no way you'd rather be.

And though you're not being rewarded with a nice pay check

or a fancy car for the fact of giving your time, and your talents, and your efforts to this cause,

More whole heartedly than you do in the work you're actually paid for...

...you realize that you're receiving a more beautiful gift, in standing there bare with God,

Than you can ever receive doing any other thing with the breath in your body.

This was the response of the disciples then,

and it's the response of each of God's disciples, now.

And that means you and it means me.

As God's disciples in this present moment---

because don't fool yourself into believing we're anything other than that—

(---we are Jesus' disciples. God's disciples. ...)

Now that the others have passed on from here, and we're the ones standing here, now.)

---As God's disciples, we're led into some painful places. Scary places. Awkward places...

If we're doing it right---places under any other circumstances we would never choose to go....

...Moments, under any other circumstance, we'd never choose to see...

But we know ourselves as being blessed to be there.

Because we know we are with God.

And no matter how scary the place or moment is in front of our eyes,

there is no better place we can ever be.

And in these awkward places, these dangerous places,

in living as servant ministers for God

---which is what you are, in BEING Christian, (not just thinking Christian)...

...Being Christians, we keep stepping forward wherever God leads us,

Because we know what the Psalmist knew, when he said:

(Psalm 27) The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?... 4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. 5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

So when we find ourselves in those sometimes awkward moments,

being asked to talk about God, unexpectedly on the couch...

...When we're sitting at that traffic light, hesitant about rolling down the window...

...When we're trying to decide where we want to go to do God's work in the world,

And find that none of these places are comfortable,

and all of those moments will lead us into feeling we're in a place that's not really okay.

...Know that it's alright to be there. Know it's exactly where you're supposed to be,  
Because that's where God has led us.

And let yourself be glad for it, because it means you're being given  
a chance to bring God's light---to do God's work--- in a world full of dark places.

Let your heart remind you that it's in those darker places---  
---those not so bright moments--- that God's light is needed most.

Let yourself feel peace in those moments, knowing that it's only in discomfort  
that we're given the chance to give the comfort of God to others.

As we spend this time together thinking about what it means

for you to be a Christian---to be a minister for God---

---let's open our ears to the Call of the Spirit of Life,

and follow with our whole heart the path God's placed under our feet.

Knowing that we're in the best company,

and the safest place we can ever be, in dwelling in the presence of the Lord. Amen.