

Proper 21 Year C 2025

Perhaps my mother's greatest legacy to me and my two brothers is her love of reading. She was always reading. While my dad, my brothers and I were watching Gilligan's Island, or Bonanza on T.V., she would be back in her bedroom reading Carl Jung, or C.S. Lewis, or Charles Williams. And she read aloud to us boys... a lot; everything from Greek Mythology (I remember the volume entitled *Gods and Heroes*); everything from Greek Mythology to Mary Poppins. She turned her nose up at the movie *Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz*, because she proclaimed it lacked the pathos of Frank Baum's novel upon which the movie was based. She would read to us until, as she put it, "her voice got tired." We knew that her dementia had taken hold when she stopped reading. That makes me sad. Back in the day, when we started reading on our own, we had a deal with her that once we finished a book, she would buy us another. I think I read all the Hardy Boys mystery stories; the Chronicles of Narnia; later, The Lord of the Rings; but the book that still weighs most on my imagination is Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

It is a story about Meg Murry and her younger brother who travel, tesseract, through time and space to rescue their father, a noted scientist, from an oppressive ruler of another planet in a galaxy light-years away. It depicts the struggle of good against evil, and the cost of that struggle. It is at its heart about the redemptive power of Love in the face of an intractable darkness. There is a scene in the novel, while Meg is travelling through time and space, in which she is shown, by her mysterious guide, an expansive

view of the cosmos, and she sees a “black thing,” as the author puts it, an inky shadow converging on a bright and glittering galaxy. That is the “unspeakable,” her guide tells her. But it is through this black thing that she must travel in order to save her father, and the journey almost takes her life. I was twelve years old when I read this novel; and I remember being so disturbed by it that I couldn’t sleep. I woke up my mother in the middle of the night, to tell her of my dis-ease... and she said sleepily... “Jim, sugar, you’re just overstimulated” ...and then more awake, she said, “Remember, It’s just a story.” Just a story.

Indeed the novel is a fable for our time... a fable for all time; that the inky black of evil is ever encroaching upon the glittering beauty of the created order. And this reality is not just a mere philosophical premise. We see it in real time in our own culture and society. Racism, the original sin of our nation, is now being overtly embraced; the egalitarian ideals of Capitalism have been subverted to benefit the wealthy elite at the expense of a shrinking middle class and the poor; our elected representatives have lost their moral will; all-out war has been declared upon our immigrant population undermining one of the great resources and legacies of our culture; there is the threat of military occupation of our major cities in this country; the economic safety net for the poor and disenfranchised is being withdrawn as we speak; our very democracy is being dismantled by an unapologetic fascist regime. We live, suffice it to say, in dark times, at the very edge of the chasm.

This darkness is that “black thing” of which L’Engle speaks... intractable; persistent. It has been converging upon us since the dawn of time. In our Gospel reading for today Luke is giving his take on this black thing. He describes it as a great chasm fixed between the powerful and the poor, between well-being and squalor, between dignity and shame. It would be so very easy to philosophize over the problem of evil, to compartmentalize it in the realms of theology and the philosophical matters of the cosmos, but the problem of evil has real causes and real effects. We know historically that most of our societal ills have to do with the powerful lording their power over the powerless. We know that every civilization throughout recorded history was forged by violence by the powerful over the less powerful. The chasm has been fixed between us for millennia. Luke goes so far as to say that even if one came back from the dead to warn us of such evil, we would not listen.

Luke tips us off as to his premise at the outset of this parable. He describes the rich man as dressed in purple, the color of royalty. This, of course, is a reference to the empire. Those in power, the rich man our example, have cast an indifferent eye towards the least and the abused of the world. And here Luke’s theme emerges again. In the prologue of his Gospel Mary speaks of a socio-economic reversal... the poor raised up, and the rich sent away empty. Here the rich man is brought down, and the diseased beggar raised up, a dramatic reversal lest we miss the point in the prologue. But dare I say, such reversal is God’s naïve dream for the world. The chasm persists.

This story, no less, is a description of the kingdom of God... not as a utopian ideal that comes at last at the end of time; that the world might be purged of its darkness.... Luke speaks of the kingdom of God as a process, a process inclusive of both dark and light. The kingdom is a waltz between the darkness of the chasm; and the irrepressible Love of God. Brothers and sisters, the black thing will always be converging upon us. The darkness is a fixed reality, but in Love we must act to subvert its power. We must travel into the inky shadow of the dark bearing light. It is that very action that engenders the kingdom of God in its very fullness... and such action, such a journey into the fixed chasm, such a journey into the black thing comes at a cost... we must abandon our illusions of security and comfort, abandon our indifference; we must sacrifice for the goodness and truth that is Love.... Such a commitment cost Jesus of Nazareth, and others, their very lives. Such is the unscrupulous way of Love.

The enabler of this darkness is indifference. I would say that the opposite of Love is not hate, but indifference... and therefore the engine of salvation is passionate empathy... that is to say, suffering alongside of our sisters and brothers who languish at the gates of well-being and dignity, and doing all in our power to raise them up, to bind up their broken hearts, to give them a life worth living... that is why I say most Sundays that our faith is political, that faith and salvation itself is a public enterprise. The Gospel vision is that we attend to the well-being of our neighbor, the sustainability of our common life, the healing of the body politic. God's dream for the world is Love and the means of Love

is justice. We say we are a country that holds justice as a cardinal virtue, but that ideal is now under siege, as it has been since our founding.... It hangs in the balance... just as it always has. The black thing converges.

This short parable in Luke is not about one's personal obligation towards charity. It is a story about the way things are... that the black thing... corrupted power... has divided us, divides us, between those who feast, and those who starve; those who prosper and those who struggle to survive. The irony is that the creation, God's good order, does not require competition. There is abundance. There is enough for all of us; all of God's people. The demon of indifference must be exorcised. And the imbalance of power must be set right. The great irony to the way of things is that even amid the blackness lies possibility. It is from the deep, the chasm, the darkness, that God created the universe in the beginning. Love has that creative power. And know this: Love casts out all fear. We do not fear.

Good people, Love requires that we travel through the darkness of the world, across the black and unwieldy chasm, and bear Love's redeeming light. We speak Love into the unspeakable. The darkness is fixed; it is always pressing upon us, but Love is stronger. And we, dear people, choose Love. I propose that the kingdom of God is no utopia, but a glorious process in which Love embraces the dark. That is the choice for us who follow Jesus. That is our hope; that is the hope of our world.... That is our story.... Just a story.