

Light in the Darkness

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

June 2, 2024

It's almost a cliché at this point. So, you really can choose your favorite fandom, but you all know this storyline really well: the unlikely hero who gets an unexpected superpower. And in the movie version, you need a whole ten-minute montage of the character learning how to wield that power without hurting themselves or anyone else. It might take days or weeks or months, and it might be a wand or a wrist or a snowflake or, my personal favorite, a lightsaber, but eventually the hero gets it all figured out.

There's no accounting for the material destruction left in the wake of lessons that start with falling and flailing and failing, but the scene's pace eventually slows down as they stand still for a moment to swell into their new calling as a protector of the city, of the planet, of the galaxy.

These new heroes end up better and stronger than they started, armed with a special suit, an invisibility cloak, or Jedi mind tricks, impenetrable armor of various kinds to protect them from all kinds of vulnerabilities.

The Apostle Paul had a similar experience one day when he was on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus, minding his own business of leaving town to hunt down and imprison new Christians, when out of nowhere came a flash of light that struck him blind and the voice of Jesus Christ himself speaking to him out of the chaos. Meanwhile in another part of town, God was commanding a man named Ananias to go find Paul and to begin the training montage to turn a Christian-hater into one of the most powerful preachers and proclaimers of the Gospel.

In one sense, Paul is writing to the Corinthians about a superpower they all possess, but to explain

what is happening in today's text as a superhero movie storyline is trite at best. For this is no summer blockbuster that might turn into a franchise or get a cult following for a few generations. It is the God of the universe, *the* God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who is up to something here.

A few weeks ago, Ben invited us into the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4 to listen for and join in the worship happening there. As we hear part of that text again, this time I invite you to use your eyes to look for the light. Picture this:

"The one seated [on the throne] looks like jasper and carnelian [these are gems the color of flames], and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald...Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal [basically one large mirror]." The whole revelation ends with this promise: "There will be no more night [there]; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light..."

The God who, when the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, said "Let there be light," and there *was* light. The God who said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky," and there was sun and moon and stars. Day or night, there is light. The God under whose watchful provision the sun rises over mountain peaks. The God who sets the sky on fire when the sun sets over a lake. The God of the aurora borealis and the corona that blazed even at the solar eclipse.

The God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” at the very beginning, and who *is* light at the end, Paul says, shines in our hearts to give us something. God gives us this light, more brilliant than anything we can see with our eyes—the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And what do we have that could possibly contain all of this light? Clay jars.

For the same God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” also formed a human from the dust of the earth, breathing into its nostrils, and the human became a living being. A living clay jar.

Perhaps you have heard a sermon or two about how really quite strong clay jars are, and I get why that is. Just like our favorite superhero being given a superpower and a protective suit, we want to hear that being called a clay jar is about being strong enough to contain all the light in the universe. There have been days and seasons where I have longed for that training montage to happen in my own life so that I can turn this clay jar into a steel box. I want to be strong and protected from everything that batters from inside and out.

Today I want to offer to you that the enormity and power of this gift does not require us to summon or conjure up superhuman strength to hold it all in. The purpose of the clay is so that we have proof, not of the weakness of the container, but of the strength of the light we have been given. Or, as Paul puts it, “We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power is from God and does not come from us.”

If we could turn ourselves into a steel box, it would be clear that this power came from us. Our story would be that we are strong. We can hold it. We are a worthy container. Instead, our story is that we have been given this power to hold in our fragility.

Just like with the kids earlier, I invite you to look at your hands, but this time, think about all that you hold.

About all that feels unsteady or vulnerable. All that is unsettled. All that is uncertain or confusing. All that is painful and broken. It’s okay to acknowledge your fragility, to feel our fragility. We all have it. Not a single person in this room, at any age or stage, is exempt from this very human reality.

We know what darkness feels like. We know what fragile feels like. It feels like a knee that starts acting up right after you have a hip replaced. It feels like a parent that, no matter how hard they try, still can’t see you for the fullness of who you are. It feels like a string of bad days when you thought you were doing really well. It feels like a relationship that used to be so full of life, now draining it from you completely. It feels like a world that is exploding all around us, and it seems like there is so little we can do to stop it.

Scripture itself is full of clay jars. If you want to compare yourself to someone in the Bible and find yourself reflected there, their ordinary humanness is a great place to start.

These folks were fragile clay jars, and they knew darkness and light. Sarah was considered barren and laughed in the face of God’s promised provision. Moses was a stutterer with some major leadership problems. David was a problematic leader with a wandering eye. Mary was an unwed pregnant virgin. Paul, even after his conversion, wrote repeatedly about his own weakness. They had nothing grand or strong about which to preach themselves.

Like us, many of them asked, “How can darkness hold light? How can my fragile self hold treasure?”

Paul testifies on behalf of all of us that we are afflicted in every way but not crushed. We are perplexed but not driven to despair. We are persecuted but not destroyed. We are struck down but not forsaken.

Hear this good news: the container may be vulnerable, but the treasure is not.

How do we know how to move forward? God paved the way for us in Jesus Christ. Because what *is* the

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? It is to know that the face of Jesus Christ is a human one. It is to know that the almighty God of the universe became a vulnerable infant. It is to know that the glory of God was to empty himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and humbling himself all the way to death on a cross.

In this way, in Jesus Christ, we see what it looks like to have the light of the entire cosmos contained in a living clay jar. Even though he was God, he did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited. Instead, he had compassion on the sick, looked with eyes of acceptance and love on those society had relegated to the margins. He challenged governments and religious leaders. He wept.

As followers of Christ, we are called to this way of life as well, not to join the ranks of impenetrable superheroes but to live a life-long training montage of our own, one of faithful discipleship and Christlikeness as the light-containing clay jars that we are.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.