

“Blind Summit”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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¹ My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; ²for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

³Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:1-6)

When Stephanie and I were in Scotland this past July, we did a lot of driving in the Scottish highlands. One of our more memorable drives was up through the Cairngorms National Park, which contains some of the highest peaks in Scotland. On this particular day, we were on a very narrow road that went up and over one of them. It was almost too much for the little Honda we were driving to handle, especially in the last steep runup to the top. And as we neared the crest of the hill, I spotted a road sign that had become very familiar to us.

The sign reads simply, “Blind Summit,” and it is self-explanatory. “In case you may not be paying attention,” the sign is saying, “you need to realized that you are about to reach a point in the road where you have no idea what may be coming at you next.” It might be a glorious vista that you will be able to enjoy in isolated peace and gratitude. But it could also be a sharp curve and a huge truck spilling over into your lane as it barrels toward you. It might be nothing new, or it might change everything.

I don’t know about you, but that sign seems to sum up what the world feels like right now. It feels like we are all racing toward a point in the road where we cannot see what is coming next. We cannot know exactly what is coming, but it feels ominous.

I think that is exactly the way Ralph Abernathy must have felt in 1961 as he accepted the call to be the pastor of West Hunter Baptist Church in Atlanta. He had already been serving as a pastor in Montgomery, Alabama, where he worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. on the bus boycotts. He already had first-hand experience of the cruel and violent backlash of white supremacist rage and institutional government racism. Now he was moving closer to the heart of the resistance, joining King in Atlanta.

At his service of installation, the sermon was offered by MLK himself. The title was “A Knock at the Door,” and it was based on the scripture from Luke that Wes read a few minutes ago. Standing beside Abernathy, King spoke about the dread that can come with an unexpected knock in the middle of the night. You have no idea what is waiting on the other side of the door. Is it a friend or a foe? What might this person want from you? Will you answer the call, or ignore it and pretend you cannot hear the knock at the door?

“It is midnight,” King called out from the pulpit. “It is midnight in this parable, but I would like to remind you this afternoon, my friends, that it is also midnight in our world



today.”¹ He then went on to specify three ways that was midnight there, in 1961. “It’s midnight in the social order,” he said. “[T]he United States is... poisoning the moral atmosphere with the continuation of racial prejudice. And it is one of the ironies of history that in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal, we’re still arguing over whether the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character. It’s midnight in the social order.”

“It’s also midnight in the psychological order,” he said. “Whenever I’m in town, I can hardly find enough hours in the day to counsel with people who are confronting problems. Psychopathic wards of our hospitals today are filled. People are haunted by day and plagued by night with crippling anxieties and paralyzing fears. Yes, it’s midnight in the psychological order.”

“But not only that,” he continued, “it is midnight in the moral order.” And this is where he really took off. “Midnight,” King said, “is a time when all moral values lose their distinctiveness. Morality becomes a thing that is measured in terms of what the people are doing. At midnight, absolute standards pass away. A dangerous ethical relativism comes into being, so at midnight, men begin to say that there is nothing absolutely right and absolutely wrong; it’s just a matter of what the majority of people are doing. So at midnight, men live by some such philosophy as this: everybody is doing it, so it must be all right.”

The congregation was on its feet now, and he was just getting warmed up. “Nobody today is much concerned about the Ten Commandments,” King told them. “They are not important at midnight. Everybody is busy obeying the eleventh commandment: thou shall not get caught. It’s alright to lie... just lie with a bit of finesse. It’s alright to exploit, but be a dignified exploiter. It’s alright even to hate, but dress your hate up in the garments of love and make it appear that you are loving when you are actually hating... This is the philosophy at midnight. It’s midnight in the moral order!”

Well, just in case we have not realized that we are reaching a critical point in the road, let me post the sign plainly. We are, as people of faith, at a blind summit. It is midnight here and now, and there is a persistent and undeniable knock at our door. And it seems obvious that we have not made much progress since 1961. We are still wrestling with the cruel and violent backlash of white supremacist rage. We are still experiencing the injustice of institutional government racism. Once again, it is midnight in the social order.

It is also midnight in the psychological order. More and more people are more and more stressed out and anxious. Mental illness is on the rise while the resources for alleviating and treating mental illness are drying up. Nine people were killed in Erie, Pennsylvania on Friday, when a man snapped and went on a shooting rampage, killing seven family members, including a pregnant woman and two children, and a friend of the family who was hysterically pounding on the door trying to save anyone she could. Who can deny it is midnight in the psychological order?

And it is certainly midnight in the moral order. With each passing day, it becomes clearer that America is losing its moral center. Ethical boundaries are being ignored and washed away, and we are just watching it happen. Wealth inequality is increasing and working families are struggling, and we are just watching it happen. And now we hear of plans to bring back public executions, gruesome celebrations of vengeance livestreamed for all to

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/knock-midnight-sermon-delivered-installation-service-ralph-abernathy-west-0>

see, and the hope of those who are promoting this spectacle is that we will all tune in to watch it happen. Do not get me wrong, what that shooter did at Fort Hood is indefensible and justice demands that he be punished, but the hope that families and children will cheer the spilling of more blood is a sign of a deep sickness in our nation. It is midnight in the moral order, and someone who needs help is knocking at our door.

Now, it is one thing to come up to a blind summit during the daytime, when there is some light, when we are senses are most awake. It is an entirely other thing to come up to one at night... when the darkness has fallen, when we are worn down, tired, and our senses are dulled. And that seems to be where we are. People are weary, and we are becoming numb.

So what do we do, as people of faith? I will tell you what we do. We hold fast to proven, tested, ancient wisdom. There is an entire section of the Bible known as the "Wisdom Literature," and the book of Proverbs is at its core. And the Wisdom Literature tells us exactly what we need to do when darkness falls and we cannot see the road ahead.

Number one: Be on guard. Pay attention. Watch for the signs and recognize what is happening. *"Above all else,"* the book of Proverbs says, *"guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."*

And number two: Trust in God. If the Wisdom Literature is anything it is honest. The Book of Job, which is part of the Wisdom Literature, is honest about grief and loss and injustice. The Book of Ecclesiastes, which is part of the Wisdom Literature, is honest about the fact that there will be happy times and sad times, easy times and difficult times. And the Psalms and the Proverbs, which are at the core of the Wisdom Literature, are honest about the fact that the world is not always safe, not always kind, not always fair. But it never wavers on who we have to trust. *"Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart... Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge [God], and he will make straight your paths."*

If we do those two things – if we guard our hearts, and entrust them to God -- it doesn't matter what is on the other side of that hill, and it doesn't matter who or what is knocking at the door. As people of faith, we can keep moving ahead with the confidence and assurance that God will guide our steps and will be with us whatever may come. As Christ himself taught, *"[D]o not be anxious about your life... Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ... Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."*²

Now, that may seem like pie-in-the-sky, it may seem more like foolishness than wisdom, but the truth is, that is faith. Faith is trust: trust that God will be with us, no matter what is waiting for us on the other side of the hill... trust that love will prevail, no matter what is waiting for us on the other side of the hill... trust that, even at midnight, the dawn will come.

² Matthew 6:25-34.

And that is the kind of faith that Ralph Abernathy had, the kind of faith that West Hunter Baptist Church had. With that rousing start from Martin Luther King, Jr., pastor and church recognized the signs and guarded their hearts. Pastor and church trusted in the Lord with all their hearts... they did not rely on their own insight, but in all their ways they tried to acknowledge God, knowing that God would have a hand on the wheel, and would make their paths straight. And they answered the knocks that came to their door. They became a bright light in the darkness of the 1960's, and their central rallying cry was a simple but powerful statement of faith that will forever be linked to the Rev. Ralph Abernathy: ***"I don't know what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future."***

In every life there are times when the road ahead seems clear and hopeful, when the sun is shining and we feel good about where we are and where we are going. But every life also brings us to blind summits, points in the road where what lies ahead is hidden. It feels to me that we are at one of those vital points. The good news is that we can cross this summit... we can meet the twists and turns that lie ahead... and we can trust the steps we take if we follow the time-tested, heaven-blessed, and rock-solid wisdom of the saints:

Guard your heart, and give God your heart. For though we do not know what the future holds, we do know who holds that future. ***Amen.***