33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle A, 11.19.17
Proverbs 31:10-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6/
Matthew 25:14-30

Step into the Sun... Step into the Light

Do you recall the end of Act I in the movie, Wizard of Oz? The four unlikely traveling companions -- Dorothy, The Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion -- are off to see the Wizard in Emerald City. Each is in need of something or Someone who will help them... who will secure for them what each one needs to be whole, to be free, to be home. The Wicked Witch of the West threatens them along the way, but now they are very close. They can see the beautiful Emerald City of Oz in the distance. The witch tries again; she creates a beautiful field of poppies, but the scent of the poppy flower is poisonous and Dorothy falls into a deep sleep.

Her traveling companions are afraid that they might have to abandon their vital quest. That poppy flower is a symbol of death. The Ancient Greeks and Romans gave them as offerings to the dead, the Egyptians placed poppies in burial tombs, and tombstones often featured poppy emblems. But the poppy also symbolizes the dangers of another kind of death -- complacency and apathy, qualities that lull us into drifting along in our lives instead of living fully and freely.

Remember last week’s gospel and the five bridesmaids who, out of laziness or apathy, failed to take extra oil for their lamps. They ended up outside in the dark, disinvited to the feasting of the wedding banquet. And today the gospel presents us with the third servant who, instead of investing his master’s money industriously like the other two servants, buries it in the ground – in the darkness and out of sight. The master calls him out: You wicked lazy servant! And then he too, like the foolish bridesmaids, is excluded: Throw this useless servant into the darkness outside!

How many times are you and I stymied by fear or anxiety? We fail to act because we lack the courage it takes to do the right thing, to make the difficult choice, act out of our convictions, or face the challenge of tackling head-on the issue or problem confronting us. It’s worse than procrastination. It can feel like we’re in darkness, locked out and helpless. If only we would take the Lord at his word we can, with God’s grace, overcome whatever obstacles we face. The Psalmist today assures us: Blessed are you who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways! For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored. Through challenging scriptures during these last Sundays of the
Church Year we’re reminded that it’s up to us to cooperate with God as co-creators of the Kingdom. We’ve each been entrusted with unique, personal gifts and talents that really belong to God. As we wait for Christ to come in glory, we’re required to use those gifts to the best of our ability.

In the movie, Dorothy fortunately wakes up from her sleep. Glinda, the Good Witch, rescues the travelers by covering the poppies with snowflakes. As the relieved and re-energized quartet get back on the Yellow Brick Road, once again with the castle of Oz clearly in their sight, a musical chorus urges them on, singing the song entitled "Optimistic Voices:"

You're out of the woods You're out of the dark You're out of the night
Step into the sun Step into the light
Hold onto your breath
Hold onto your heart Hold onto your hope
March up to the gate and bid it open

I can hear the echo of St. Paul encouraging the community of Thessalonica to be alert and ready for the coming of the Lord: Friends, Paul writes, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.

∞ ∞ ∞

The national news these past few days has been very disheartening. I’m sure, like me, you’ve been wondering when, where... if... the accusations of the harassment and sexually inappropriate treatment of women, including teenage girls, will end. From every corner of the social spectrum – political settings, sports, the entertainment industry, the corporate world, even the halls of our nation’s Capital, women and some men, too, have stepped forward, courageously telling the story of what happened to them when men in authority or positions of power tried to or did take advantage of them. Certainly, as a Church we have known our share of the burden of guilt in looking the other way in the face of overwhelming and unbelievable facts.

We can only begin to imagine the courage it must take for a woman to step forward and acknowledge that she has been a victim. It really doesn’t matter how long ago the offence took place. That only confirms the darkness and shame, the cloud of fear that keeps a woman from coming forward. Representative Jackie Speier, from the Peninsula, was the first member of Congress to acknowledge her own experience of sexual assault on Capital Hill. She testified last week before a Congressional committee, addressing this issue and urging action so that women could work freely in their places of employment, without fear of retaliation, doing their jobs effectively and capably. Her courage to step into the light and bring the issue of harassment into the open has given other women an open door to speak their truths. One woman told the Representative: I’m a single mother. I can’t afford to lose my job.” The fear that holds women hostage needs to be removed.
I was dumbfounded by the contrast of the women’s experience that we’ve seen in the recent news – women being disrespected for who they are, and the biblical description of the “woman of worth” in today’s reading from Proverbs. We don’t often think of women in the scriptures – Old or New Testament – as having such a prominent place of dignity and honor. Their culture is centuries and worlds away from ours. Yet the woman in Proverbs is described as fiercely independent. Her industry and initiative as a capable woman are praised by her children and her husband. She’s strong and dignified, but also compassionate and kind. She’s treated with deference and as an equal in her community.

I was raised in a strong matriarchy by a strong but loving mother and three capable and accomplished sisters. No brothers… so it was my Dad and I in a losing battle at times. But I learned from those women in my life, early in life, about the dignity of women, about their capabilities, about the importance of reflecting both the feminine and masculine principles of life in every field, including the Church.

Wherever things are kept in the dark, hidden away from the light, the truth of God cannot exist. Fidelity to the Reign of God requires that we be willing to take risks, that we courageously name the deeds of darkness, and that we call ourselves and others to task when fear or apathy undermine our quest for truth and integrity.

This woman of worth is an image of God who created her. She stands as model for us to banish the darkness in our lives and in our world and, at the invitation of the song from the movie:

*Step into the sun… Step into the light…*

Fr. John Kasper, osfs