

No Sunshine January 4, 2009

January is upon us, and we're into winter full speed ahead. I don't know about you, but this is a difficult time of the year for me. I find it harder to get up in the mornings when it's dark and cold, and it's pretty easy to go around on dreary days in sort of a stupor. It's as though everything is muffled and somber, and some of us who aren't really prone toward depression find ourselves feeling down.

I suppose part of the problem has to do with the fact that it seems as though there's little to look forward to once the holidays have passed. And, with the economy and all the uncertainty that seem to be so pervasive, this season appears to be the perfect winter to get a major case of the blahs!

When we have the blues or blahs, or whatever you want to call them, we tend to do all the wrong things—you know, we sleep too much, eat too much or we eat all the wrong things; we don't exercise as much, gain weight, and basically fall into a state of disrepair. In some ways, we're like bears heading into hibernation, except that we don't have the luxury of hibernating. We seem to be tired all the time, disinterested in things that previously consumed us, and sometimes just plain tend to withdraw, cocooning in our homes.

I know folks, and I suspect you do, too, who suffer from what is sometimes referred to as "SAD," Seasonal Affective Disorder. Actually, this syndrome was only identified and named in the 1980's. It appears to be relatively common, especially women and younger folks, and in places that are in some of the northernmost latitudes. It's infrequent in Florida, for example,—as little as 1%, but in Alaska, the rates can range up to 12-18%!

Now, doctors will tell us that it has something to do with an imbalance of melatonin and serotonin, and a disruption in our body's circadian rhythm, which is the physiological process that regulates our internal clock. The root cause of this seasonal disorder, we're told, is the reduced hours of sunlight that we experience in winter. We all need natural light to lift our spirits, energize us, and get us moving, and the amount of sun we

get in winter is a lot less that we get during the spring and summer.

So, what do we do about that? We have no control over the weather, so we can't demand that the sun shine everyday during the month of January. Oh, I suppose we could, but it really is wasted effort. Rather, it seems that there are other ways to deal with the winter blues. Some Gardeners plan an escape to warmer, sunnier climates during the winter months, and that seems to help, but unfortunately, not all of us can afford to do that, even for just a few days.

So, if we're stuck in Indiana during the winter, what other options do we have? Every article I read about the winter blahs suggested several common sense kinds of things, like getting out of the house for some time every single day. We can avoid cabin fever that way, and put ourselves where there is more activity and energy. We can keep the blinds and drapes in our homes or offices open, and let as much natural light as possible enter. We can head out first thing in the morning for a brisk walk, and start our day outdoors, even if it's still dark. If things like that fail, we can purchase a light lamp that, through an hour of exposure every day, our symptoms can be greatly reduced.

Now, those are the suggestions, the remedies that the medical community offers, but I would like to propose another. Frankly, I know it is something easier said than done, but I'm still going to say it. Instead of looking for the light to come from somewhere else, I wonder what it would be like for us to consider BEING the light. How might our winter blahs, the doldrums that others might experience be lightened by the way we become light in this world.

That's part of how we could understand our Bible passage for this morning, I think. It's Jesus speaking, and is an example of the way he used stories and images to appeal to the people of his day, and remarkably, speak to us today! Here's how the passage reads: **"No one lights a lamp and then hides it or puts it under a basket. Instead, it is put on a lamp stand to give light to all who enter the room...If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight is shining on you."**

How then, do we become filled with the light in such a way that the light can shine through us? I would suggest to you that the

light comes from God, and God's love for us. If we can focus our hearts and minds around the reality that this source of loving goodness really does value us and marvel at us, then I'm reasonably sure we can find enough strength, energy and courage to be a point of light, a point of brightness in a world that might otherwise be pretty dark and dismal.

You see, it all really comes from God—just think, in the first story of creation, God said, "Let there be light," and I don't believe God just meant there to be sunlight and darkness, day and night. I wonder if God wasn't also suggesting that light is present in our world in many, many ways, and one of those ways is in us, in our being filled with the light of love, reaching beyond ourselves and sharing that light with others.

I really like the way Edith Wharton put it: "There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

I'm convinced that the light that comes from God shines upon us every day, whether or not the sun is out. We can absorb that light, and then become the mirror that reflects the light out into the world for others to see.

Now, lest we think that sounds pretty farfetched, allow me to remind us of something Jesus said in that collection of wisdom we call the Sermon on the Mount. He put it like this: "You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the light for all to see." He went on to say how our light was to shine, and it's simply in our good deeds.

It's in the way we treat the members of our family, our friends, the stranger on the street, the shopper in the store. It's how we respond in our winning and losing; it's how we deal with both good fortune and bad. It really has to do with getting outside ourselves, reducing our navel-gazing, and focusing our attention on others, and on the many needs that surround us.

It's about a shift in focus, and a shift in attitudes. If we are moping about the dreariness and lack of sunshine, maybe we need a new attitude. Instead of the glass being half empty, perhaps we should try to see it as half full. If it's a bleak, dismal day, let's take hope in the fact that spring will still come, the sun will shine another day, and warmth will eventually replace the cold. It's a matter of *choosing* to look on the bright side, and only we can control that.

Sue Monk-Kidd offered an example of the bright side when she shared a story about helping to serve meals to the homeless and hungry at a soup kitchen on a cold day in Atlanta. Near the door, she noticed a woman wearing a very thin coat, a ski cap, and *one* glove. She clasped her unprotected hand in the gloved hand, and tried to rub some warmth into it. Monk-Kidd remarked to the woman, "I see you lost a glove." "No," was the response. "I found one." The woman was not focused on the fact that she only had one glove, but on the joy that she did have at least one!

How many of us can do that? I would suggest to you that it has a lot to do with what we find deep within us. If we allow ourselves to be filled with fear and foreboding, clinging to "the sky is falling" mentality, then we will have a tough time finding the positive, the good.

However, I'm convinced, that if we allow it, we can be confident and positive, knowing deep in our hearts that whatever we experience today is only temporary, not a permanent state of being. It's all part of a bigger picture, and God is in that picture. It's like something Goethe was quoted as saying, "Sometimes our fate resembles a fruit tree in winter. Who would think that those branches would turn green again and blossom, but we hope it, we know it." That's the given, the assurance, the promise—that spring will follow winter just as surely as day follows night.

In my mind, that means that we can have hope no matter what—hope that, even as hard as it gets, it will be OK. It means that no matter how deep a valley we're going through, there will be a better day; No matter how alone we feel, God still cares about us; No matter how bleak the future seems, we can still put one foot in front of the other, because of hope, because of God. Hope can fill us with joy, and being even a little bit hopeful allows the light to get through in such a way that we can be a light for others.

No sunshine? I don't think so. Even if the sun isn't shining in our January skies, the light of God's love can shine in our hearts, and radiate out to all those we encounter....if we let it.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that you and I will open our hearts to receive the light of God's love in such a way that it gets reflected through us out into the world, and makes life better for all of us.

Have a great Sunday, and go in
peace. Amen.