

A friend of mine was absolutely terrified of outer space when she was a kid. She could not handle the hugeness of space, how dark it was, how little we knew, how cold it was, and just how overwhelming that idea was for her. One night, she had a nightmare about space and could not fall back asleep because she was so afraid of what space actually was. She tossed and turned and finally went and found her dad. He could tell she was upset, so she climbed into his lap, where he gave her a big hug and brought her comfort. Within that warmth and embrace, and after a bit of her own wrestling, she felt safe enough to ask him, "Dad, tell me about space." So he held her and told her about the planets, the moon landings, the stars, and all the kinds of things that kids can start to wrap their heads around, and eventually, she started to feel okay again. She rested in that hug and in that embrace as her loving dad helped her face her fear. She needed that reassurance of what was real, what she could touch and feel, before she could start to sort through the problems and possibilities in what she was afraid of.

Eventually, her fear of space dissipated over time, as kids so often learn to be okay with what holds them captive in fear when they get overwhelmed by the hugeness of the world.

But it was only within that foundation, that knowledge that she could be held by her loving dad and he would be there for her, that she was able to grow and learn.

I often think of God in this way, as the loving dad who holds us and is there for us when things feel too big or too overwhelming. God holds us in our hearts and in our spirits, and indeed God is that reassurance of what's real in the midst of our fear.

But a key part of this fatherly love we receive from God, is similar to what we experience as children growing up. We cannot constantly be in that comfort and safety of a parent's arms - when we venture out into the world, when we explore and learn and grow, that's when we really begin to face what it is that overwhelms us or makes us afraid. Or sometimes we simply need to waddle on our own, courageously and curiously moving one foot in front of the other as we learn to move on our own through the world,

grabbing a table or chair or friendly arm to steady ourselves in the newness of the movement.

Children learn when they are able to explore and be curious and do best when they know the loving foundation is there for them, but also have the ability to discover and grow on their own. And so God our heavenly father, the loving parent of Christ Jesus and creator of humanity, is absolutely our loving foundation. God is always there to embrace us in God's steadfast and everlasting love and life. But we also need to do some venturing of our own to grow into the fullness of life here on earth.

Today's Gospel reading contains what is perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, which gives us that foundation of love and safety from God. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

After this comforting embrace verse, though, we dive into some heavier stuff from Jesus. Particularly, we hear about evil and darkness that is in opposition to the light that Jesus brings to the world.

Sometimes, in our venturing out into this world God made, we don't know that what we're doing is leading us into darkness. Sometimes, we are just doing what we can to survive and our minds and bodies can't always tell that what was once necessary for survival is now hurting ourselves or the people around us - this is what happens when we experience trauma, particularly. Sometimes we think an action only impacts ourselves, but really negatively impacts the people around us too. And sometimes we act in ways that we were taught to be correct, and beneficial for us or our beloveds, but these things come at the expense of another's well-being. We don't always know the ripple effects of what we learned in previous settings or seasons of life. Sometimes we do intentionally choose the way of darkness, of hurting someone else or proclaiming false gods and false truths, of simply not caring what the consequences are. And sometimes, the darkness simply finds us, whether we like it or not. Sometimes the demons of depression, anxiety, addiction, and other mental health struggles find their way into our lives without our consent, and we must fight them to continue going on.

Sometimes the pain of illness, in ourselves or our loved ones, throws us into a dark place that opens up pain we never knew were able to be felt. Our way into the darkness is not always intentional.

It's hard to make peace with the world when we realize how dark it can be sometimes. It's hard to read some of the troubling things in scripture and yet still know that God so loved the world. There are things in our lives, in our scriptures, in our course of life that are indeed challenging to grapple with. We can easily become rooted in fear or anguish and not know what to do when we wake up to the realities and hardships of the world, or simply know that there is another day dawning when we have to confront something really hard in our immediate sphere too.

I think we all experienced a bit of this darkness in this past year of pandemic, with the general hardships and "dumpster fire" nature of 2020. We've seen some real and traumatic darkness, with over half a million Americans dead because of COVID-19 and millions of others who are sick and grieving, lonely, ill, not knowing how to make ends meet, or even how to get out of bed in the morning. We've seen how much work there is yet to do in ensuring justice and freedom for all people in our country. And we've seen some real dark vitriol of neighbors against neighbors for political reasons turned moral. It's been heartbreaking and yet God has joined us in our heartbreak. In these words of Jesus we heard today, God is fully aware of the darkness and pain and hardship of the human and experience, and yet chooses us anyway. In the same speech where Jesus proclaims His own death, and speaks into the evil of this world, there is also the greatest knowledge of God's deep love for us. The light still shines in the darkness, dear friends, and the darkness is not the end or completeness of the story. We all have moments of light within the darkness, and while they do not erase the hardships of being human, of simply living in this world, they do remind us of the goodness of God. God created this world by calling it good, and for thousands of years has claimed us as His beloved people.

The light is always there, dear friends, and I pray that this assurance of light and love in Jesus Christ gives you the comfort you need, that this truth

lays the foundation for you to go into the world and still show up in love and grace. Sometimes we might wobble a little, like the little kiddo learning to walk, and sometimes we may be so frightened that we need a moment to be embraced in warmth and safety, like my friend as she bravely learned about space.

We must not be afraid to venture out into this world that promises the full range of life - new life and old love, sweet hugs and bitter tears, confidence and questions, family and strangers, wilderness and known paths, day and night, light and darkness.

God provides for us the safe embrace and reassurance we need to bring our lives and our corners of the world into the light and life promised in Christ Jesus. There is hope to be found, even in the darkest of times, and for that assurance of light and love, we give God unending thanks and praise. Thanks be to God, Amen.