

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

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## **A Way Through The Darkness**

John 12:32

In the 1530s and 1540s the city of Strasbourg in present day France, was considered to be the capital of the Reformed theological tradition. Its preachers and theologians reinvented the church pioneering many of the Presbyterian practices we take for granted today. It was in Strasbourg that John Calvin was trained for the effective ministry he would carry out in Geneva.

But in 1550 everything changed for Strasbourg. Two years earlier the city fathers made the fateful decision to participate with other city states in an ill advised war against the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Their defeat at the hands of Charles V meant that the city lost its freedom to determine its own religious identity. In the end the Reformed preachers who so ably led all the churches in Strasbourg were forced into exile. Half of the churches in Strasbourg were handed over to the Roman Catholic authorities and the other half were reorganized as Lutheran congregations. But for two long years the city waited to learn of this new arrangement.

It was during this period of anxious waiting that the first of the Strasbourg reformers, Matthew Zell, died. He had been the preaching minister in the Strasbourg Cathedral for 30 years. On January 11, 1548 the casket bearing the body of the 70 year old Zell was taken through the streets to the cemetery. Contemporary accounts say there were from three to six thousand citizens who walked behind the casket. Among them was the most distinguished Strasbourg reformer, Martin Bucer. Bucer preached the sermon at the graveside using the same text that had been preached at Martin Luther's funeral. When he finished another sermon followed. This sermon was preached by Zell's widow Katharina. They had been married for 20 years and their two children were already buried nearby. She immediately disarmed those who might object to a woman preacher by pointing out that she wasn't preaching but was like Mary Magdalene sharing the message God had given her.

In her sermon Katharina described the character of her husband and summarized his teaching. But above all she called the people to have courage in the face of the historical catastrophe that was about to unfold. Her sermon included these words:

I thank all of you with my whole heart for the love and faithfulness that you have shown to my dear husband and the diligent way you have followed him...[My husband's] death is so unbearable to me...I will mourn it to my grave...And so without God's help I cannot bear and endure this parting and loss...In the meantime, however, I also see this wicked time and distress in the whole land, and it is also before our door...I exhort and beg you with great earnestness... to honor your shepherd by keeping his teaching and acting according to it, that you never allow it to be torn from your hearts... And may God help me, a poor miserable person, as I now make my way home: the hard way of the cross. My offering, O God, is my husband, the highest and best treasure that I have on earth...Lord Jesus Christ...you are the resurrection and the life...and the eternal truth: grant that I may believe you (from *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth Century Germany*, edited and translated by Elsie McKee, pages 103-122).

Katharina's words at the graveside are so compelling because she understood that the loss of her husband coincided with an even more profound loss for her city and all those who looked to it for theological leadership. She invited her listeners to walk with her as they searched for a way through the darkness. She knew that their challenge and hers was to believe that God would be with them on their journey.

The prophet Jeremiah faced the same challenge after the fall of Jerusalem. The Babylonian invaders removed the Jewish leaders and took them into exile. It was a time of terrible crisis and unwelcome transition. Jeremiah understood that God used such times of crisis to establish covenants with the people. These covenants gave the people a way to believe that God had not forgotten them in difficult times. In Jeremiah 31 the prophet announces a new covenant which will emerge from their shattered dreams. God will change them from the inside out and forge with them a closer relationship than they have ever known.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of John we find Jesus challenging his disciples to make a similar transition. They, too, are struggling to find a way through the darkness as their journey takes them closer to Jerusalem and the cross. The nature of their journey comes into focus when some Greeks approach the disciple Philip in Galilee and ask, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus (John 12:21)." When Philip and the other disciples tell Jesus of this approach, he responds with words that they are not prepared to hear. He says to them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (John 12:23)."

Jesus goes on to speak of himself as a grain of wheat. Only by falling to the earth, dying, and being buried can wheat produce its harvest. The harvest of human redemption comes in the same way. Out of Jesus' death, new life will emerge. In proclaiming that his hour has come he points to the transition that his ministry is making. No longer is his ministry directed solely to the region of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. His death carries his ministry to the whole world. Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:32)." This is the answer to the Greeks who have come seeking Jesus' presence. But it's also a gracious word for all who are traveling in the darkness and struggling to believe.

Soon after beginning a new pastorate in Georgia, Joanna Adams was confronted with a tragedy in the congregation. A long-time member and elder of the church first killed his thirty-one year old son and then shot and killed himself. His son had suffered from schizophrenia for eight years and had quit taking his medication. He had become more and more violent and the father was afraid the son would do someone terrible harm. Adams' sermon at the memorial service has been described in these words:

She said, 'The Reformed theologian Karl Barth said that people come to church on the Sabbath with one question in their minds: Is it true?... When we come to church on a Monday afternoon for a memorial service of two people who died untimely deaths, the question is even more compelling. Is it true? Can God be trusted on a day like today?'

After forthrightly winding through all the painful questions which such tragedy spawns, Joanna Adams said, 'We are not dealing today with a God who comes around only when things are rosy and the birds are singing. There is a cross up there! The God we know in Jesus Christ knows about suffering. The God we know in Jesus Christ gets to the valley of death, gets to loss, to doubt, before we get there, so that He is ready to catch us when we stumble blindly in, so that He can guide us through the dark...It is true that God can be trusted (Elizabeth McGregor Simmons, *A Journal For Preachers*, Vol. xxxii, No. 2, page 7).'