

Ser21-3 I AM ...afraid of the dark 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51

Interview with Ashby Haines about caving...

I love the poetry and fictional writing of Wendel Berry. He's a farmer in Kentucky, a poet, a novelist, man of the land and nature and an advocate for sustainable agriculture. As a way to introduce this sermon series on Season of Epiphany, listen to one of his poems about the dark and the light:

*At night make me one with the darkness
In the morning make me one with the light.*

Let me say up front, I am extremely claustrophobic; I AM Afraid of the Dark and so the plea to make me one with the dark is a huge spiritual challenge. To get one with the dark Berry says this:

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings."*

I am delighted this morning that my friend, Ashby Haines, is joining me to help with this sermon. As you look at these two photos of Ashby, you can easily see he has a different, maybe easy experience with closed spaces and with the dark. But first, let me share a very brief story with my oldest daughter, April. Back in the day, around 1986, she was a student at Penn St. U. at about 10 o'clock on a Sunday night she called, very excited to share her day's adventure in a cave, in a cave with very, very narrow spaces, some of which she had to crawl. The more she talked the more anxious I became. You see, I remember this late night phone call as if it were last night. I don't think I slept at all the night. To understand this emotional experience, I have asked Ashby Haines to share his reflections on going caving or spelunking.

Question for you to consider:

1. So you go caving. Where? Why? What attracts you to caving?
2. What enables you to go into caves -- something many of us would never consider?
3. Do you ever get afraid? How do you deal with the fear?
4. What do you learn about yourself when you go caving?

Impressive story. Impressive courage. Even so. I am so afraid of the dark and being trapped in some cave or dark space that I can hardly breathe. I am still not going into one of those caves. No way; no how.

Our two lessons from the Bible today are not as dramatic as Ashby's story but they reinforce the claim God has on us....even in the dark, maybe, especially in the dark of night. Samuel was not afraid of the dark...in the midst of a voice calling to him in the dark of night in bed, he seeks out the voice....Rather awesome things happen in the middle of the night in the dark for Samuel and Eli.

For some people today, even those who profess Christ and seek to follow Jesus, the 'Dark' is an enemy # 1, The profound, encouraging, and challenging words of the Psalmist in Psalms 139:12 ("*...even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*") This awesome claim about God's nature and the dark can both invite us to open ourselves to God's light when we are afraid in the dark and 'smack' us gently to awaken our spiritual gifts and resources that allow us to see God's 'safety-net' in the night.

Even though I suffer anxiety about the dark, I still appreciate this invitation to "Come and See God;" to allow God to soothe our fears in the darkness; and to discover how the light can add brilliance and vitality to our lives. I can say that to you this morning, but in actual practice, the dark frightens me. So much so that I can say that even I AM afraid of being afraid. No doubt, most of us are afraid of being afraid.. Even in our fearful moments, we want to see God...to know God is working in our lives.

In our gospel lesson today Jesus encounters Philip and Nathanael – in the middle of the day, in the light of day. Jesus' invitation is the same as God's invitation to Samuel in the dark of night: "Come and See"!!! I can imagine that these calls to Phillip and Nathanael bring some anxiety to them. Drop everything and follow me, says Jesus. Enough to make anyone anxious and afraid...but also excited.. and afraid, but inspired, and afraid, but honored to be chosen as a disciple of Jesus. Amen

Pastor Gerry Hanberry