

Inside a Black Hole

OT Reading: Genesis 15:1-12; 17-18

Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

Lent 2

I'm not an astronomer, but I've always been interested in things "out there": supernova explosions, distant galaxies, and so on. Over the last few decades there has been quite a lot of speculation about "black holes". A black hole is created when a massive star collapses in on itself. The resulting material is squeezed into a tiny space so dense and with such strong gravity that nothing, not even light can escape from it. Anything unfortunate enough to be near by will be drawn in and once inside, will cease to exist. Inside a black hole space and time no longer have any meaning.

That, at least is the theory. No one has ever entered a black hole and if anyone did it's unlikely that he or she would return to tell the tale. But I would imagine that most of us have at one time or another experienced our own black holes – deep and terrifying times when our whole world seems so dark that time and space no longer seem to matter.

"A deep and terrifying darkness descended upon Abram". Abram, later to be called Abraham had long had a special relationship with God, since the day God called him to leave his homeland and go to the land that he would show him. So Abram and his wife Sarai, both by then well into their seventies had packed up their few belongings and set forth. It was quite a journey, down to Egypt and back again. Like most couples, they longed for children but as time went on it became clear that that just wasn't going to happen. As they travelled, God periodically showed up promising their offspring land and riches, until finally, Abram had had enough. "What offspring"? He demanded, "the way things are going a slave born in my house will be my heir".

After an explosion like that, you might expect God to at least give Abram a good telling off. But instead, he simply repeated his promise and then caused a deep and terrifying darkness to descend upon Abram, while he made a strong and lasting covenant with him. This may have been the closest Abram ever came to God, in the midst of which he was also in a black hole. Perhaps this is what people experience when they come that close to God.

Scripture suggests that the journey towards God often leads through a black hole. Abram in his deep and terrifying darkness; Jonah inside the whale; Jeremiah thrown into a well; and Saul knocked down and blinded for three days before being reborn as the Apostle Paul.

Why does God choose to work with us in the dark? Doctors tell us that when a person is in a coma, or near death, one of the last faculties to remain is hearing. This is why people tend to speak or play music to their loved ones even when there is no apparent response. Perhaps God takes us into black holes and removes all other distractions so that we may hear whatever it is he would like to tell us. Thus he speaks to us in dreams when our other faculties are removed and all we can do is listen and try to understand.

There is no doubt that it can be frightening to be in the dark. God's message to Abram was not all good news. First, he said, his offspring would be slaves in a foreign land for four hundred years; but then there was the promise that they would come out of that place with great possessions.

But darkness is not all bad news. In her book *Learning to walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor points out that the world is in darkness for 12 out of every 24 hours, during which God does not take time off. In fact, there is no end of important things that happen at night. While fleeing from the wrath of his brother whom he had betrayed, Jacob lay down to sleep and God visited him in a dream, promising to be with him. Later Jacob wrestled with an angel through the night, before receiving a wound and a blessing. The exodus from Egypt took place at night. Manna fell from heaven at night. And those are just a few examples.

The creation of the universe in all its mystery was preceded by complete darkness, which covered the face of the deep. Christ was born at night. During his ministry he often spent dark nights outside on a mountain in prayer. Nicodemus visited him at night. And the most important event in the Christian calendar, the resurrection happened "while it was still dark".

One thing that has intrigued scientists is what happens within or on the other side of a black hole. Does it lead anywhere? Some have wondered if black holes are actually wormholes, leading to a different galaxy or universe with different physical laws. Professor Stephen Hawking, a well known expert in the field has speculated that at the heart of every black hole is an infinitely small point known as a singularity,

where the mathematics of space and time break down. According to Einstein – another mathematical genius, our universe began in a singularity which is both the end and the beginning of time, space and matter – the destruction of all meaning, and the emergence of new meaning, new creation.

Of course, we don't know, and may never know what really lies within, or on the other side of black holes, but as we travel through the season of Lent and Eastertide we are reminded over and over again that new life inevitably follows darkness.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”. After confronting God, Abram found himself in a black hole, from which he woke to new life and a new promise. Following a black night spent wrestling with an angel and his own conscience, Jacob emerged with a new name and a new blessing. Saul's days of complete blindness led to a new life and mission. And on Good Friday we remember the very blackest of black holes, the moment of complete loss and abandonment - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”? which moves to the moment of resolution - “It is finished”, which in turn opens the door to new life and new creation for us all.

Amen

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