

“Befriending the dark”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 1:18-25, 2:1-12

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

My son, Emerson, is scared of the dark. Not uncommon, of course, for a two-year-old. Interestingly, though, he didn't start out that way. He had no problem with the dark, even enjoyed it, until six months ago. Suddenly, his old friend the dark became threatening, as it foretold the separation of parent and child. Now, we reassure him that there are no monsters; a nightlight burns bright nearby; and the light in the hallway shines all night, a luminescent umbilical cord stretching from his room to ours.

In her delightful book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, upon which this sermon is based, Barbara Brown Taylor wonders what it would have been like if her parents, instead of turning on the lights, had taught her to face the dark and learn its secrets. She writes, “There is no telling what I might have said if they had asked me what color the monsters’ eyes were, or what the witches were planning to do to me. If they had, I might have learned to become more curious about what the darkness inside me was dishing up. I might have learned to look more deeply instead of looking away, but one thing my parents and I shared was the wish for a quick fix... eliminate the darkness. Leave a light on in my room at night so that it was never dark.”

Many of us, according to Taylor, never cease to be that child. She refers not only to literal darkness, but also figurative darkness: grief, doubt, loneliness, all the things that bring us here on the longest and darkest night of the year, at the culmination of what has been for many of us the longest and darkest year.

We avoid the dark. In fact, we have lights in our homes and in our cities to do just that, street lamps that burn 24/7, neon signs, televisions, and smart phones, headlights traveling down highways, whole swaths of earth never dark again. Deeper still, we bury the darkness of grief or doubt, pretending everything is OK, hiding in our work, pummeling our psyches with bright entertainment, food, and narcotics, even religion. Taylor speaks of a “sunny” faith that is loud, never quiet; happy, never sad. If something bad happens, like a pandemic, you’re told to have faith and know that everything will be OK if you just believe. Believe in a sunny God whose doctrinal truths are clear and indisputable, never mysterious or complicated.

The darkness is bad, we say, synonymous with sin, ignorance, and death. Darkness is the absence of God.

But where does this leave us when we face darkness, when we lose our job, get cancer, or our marriage falls apart, our nation goes into shut-down, or our faith comes into doubt? If God is only light, then we are bound to think God is not there in the dark; we’re on our own. And should we try to ignore that darkness, what will happen to us? Taylor writes, “I have learned that

sadness does not sink a person; it is the energy a person spends trying to avoid sadness that does that.”

When we eliminate the dark, we miss out on an entire half of our existence. There is so much we cannot see in the day: the stars, the moon, fireflies, and the way the snow falls at night. Thanks to artificial light, the Milky Way is now invisible to two-thirds of Americans. God created us such that our health and sleep depend on the dark.

“God, yours is the day, yours also the night,” says the psalmist (74:16). “You make darkness, and it is night,” he sings (104:20). God is the God of both light and dark. We need the dark, for there are things to learn there, which we cannot learn in the light.

Taylor recalls her first experience going deep into a wild cave, led (of course) by a retired Presbyterian minister. After crawling through the cave, they reach a spot where they stop and turn off their headlamps. It’s completely dark. For Taylor, it feels like “being back in [her] mother’s womb.” Her other senses come alive, as she touches and learns the contours of every wall and rock. What sounds like the roar of a jet engine speeds past her; it’s a fly. After it passes, she notices a new sound, “something that sounded like the hum of a high-voltage wire.” She realizes that the sound is coming from within her body. She writes, “I had never heard my life before.”

She finds and pockets a rock of tiny crystals. It shines, a rainbow of color. When she gets home, she whips the rock out, “anticipating miniature fireworks,” only to discover that it “looks like a piece of road gravel.” Gray and unimportant. But when she turns off the lights, shining only a penlight, “the stone turns into a diamond factory before [her] eyes... The stone is alive with light, but only in the dark. When [she] turn[s] on the lamp again, it goes back to being a small piece of gravel in [her] hand.”

Some kinds of grace come only in the dark. When Abraham was full of doubt, God led Abraham into the night to look at the sky and behold the stars. When Jacob betrayed his family and ran away, God came to Jacob at night and showed him a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Later, Jacob and God would wrestle through the night, with God blessing him in the dark. The Exodus happens at night. God parts the Red Sea at night. God feeds the people with manna at night. Moses receives the Law atop a mountain in a dark cloud, meeting a God who can only be experienced in dark mystery.

Almost the entire Christmas story takes place in the dark. God tells Joseph in a dream at night to be a father to Jesus and a husband to Mary. The magi follow a star at night, the very star that is visible tonight, as it has not been in 800 years. Angels sing to shepherds at night. And it is under the cover of darkness that the holy family flees to Egypt.

None of this could have happened in the light of day; these were revelations, and comforts, reserved for the dark of night.

Like the rock Taylor found in the cave, it is often only in the dark that we can see God.

Maybe, instead of eliminating the dark, we should befriend it. It's like what Taylor says of the cave she explores—the only way out is in.

For me, during these holidays, my first without my Mom, that's meant setting aside time each day to open my grief. I read devotionals and grief books, light candles, listen to music, remember, pray, cry, laugh, call my family. That's befriending the dark. It's taking the time to be with it, to enter the cave, to learn its walls, to hear what it has to teach, and yes, to bang our fists against it when needed. It's to listen to what we're feeling and ask what it's trying to tell us.

Taylor says, however, that there is one cardinal rule to caving and walking in the dark. Never do it alone. We need people who have been here before and perhaps even know the way out. Our dark opens to their dark, and in love, we stand together.

Tonight, let us walk with Christ. For he is born in the dark. He loves and cares for people with their own special brands of darkness. He keeps vigil in the dark. He dies, is buried, and is resurrected in the dark. He is the light that shines in the dark, not to eliminate it, but to illuminate it. He comes to be with us in the dark, to lead us deeper into the dark, that we might learn and grow from it, and emerge, undefeated by the dark.

It's why perhaps my son Emerson is only afraid of the dark when he's alone. When I'm with him, the dark is fun. He loves to go outside at night and look at the stars and the moon. He loves to walk in the dark. He loves to play beneath blanket forts and to hide. The dark is his friend—as long as I am with him. As long as he is not alone. And perhaps that is the true lesson of the longest night and the Christmas it heralds: that to befriend the dark, it is best not to go alone. May Christ go with you, Emmanuel. **Amen.**