

Darkness

Luke 1:67-79

December 19th, 2021

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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Today's Scripture is from Luke's gospel. There are not one, but 2 miraculous birth stories that begin Luke's gospel. The first is not about Jesus, but about John the Baptist. Born to Elizabeth and to Zechariah, John would "prepare the way" for Jesus by preaching the good news of repentance and forgiveness. Zechariah initially cannot believe, at his and Elizabeth's old age, they will have a son. The angel makes him mute—he can't speak. When he finally can speak again, he doesn't speak, he sings. This is what he sings about the birth of his son John:

⁶⁷ ... Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:
⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for [God] has looked favorably on [God's] people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ [God] has raised up a mighty savior^[a] for us
in the house of the servant David,
⁷⁰ as [God] spoke through the mouth of the holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus [God] has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered [God's] holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that [God] swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve [God] without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before [God] all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to the people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Barbara Brown Taylor has a wonderful book (many, in fact)—but the one I'm thinking of is called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. She begins it with a memory that is likely familiar to all of you. She is a child, and she still hears her mother's voice beckoning her into the house with the words, "come inside now, it's getting dark."

The assumption behind the words, Taylor writes, is that when it's dark outside, it's dangerous. "The dangerousness of the dark," Taylor says, was like the law of gravity. No one could say *exactly* how it works, but *everyone agreed on it.*"

Darkness can be scary, when we're young. When we're young, the world is vast and inscrutable and sometimes terrifying. But Taylor goes on to observe that our childhood fears of the dark follow us into adulthood. "Darkness" becomes a word that we use as a stand in for anything that

brings fear: uncertainty, sickness, failure, loneliness, depression, death. We cloak in the language of “darkness” anything that we are afraid will consume us.

Taylor testifies to another way. She says, “I have learned things in the darkness that I would never have learned in the light. I *need* darkness as much as I *need* light.”

I want to ask—is that true? Is it true for you? For us? Do we need darkness as much as light?

IMAGE: Planet in Shadow

Some of us take our cues about what is wise and good from the natural world. If you count yourself among those people, the answer to whether we need darkness is “yes.” Darkness, in case you hadn’t noticed, half of every day. Sometimes more than half. I saw a tweet the other day in which a person who was going through a tough patch was trying to get some perspective, so they googled the time of December sunset in Sweden. Do you know what it is? 2:47PM. That’s a lot of darkness every day. Darkness is natural and it is both essential and nourishing. Whether you think God set the planets in motion or whether you think this is all the result of some wondrous cosmic accident, for all of us, for one half of every day, we turn our face away from the sun. We move away from the light and into the shadow. Every day, darkness covers us.

In spite of what your mother warned you, good things do happen after midnight.

IMAGE: Child Sleeping

For one, we rest. We have circadian rhythms in our operating system that tell us it’s time to sleep. Sleep is as essential to your life as eating or breathing. In the darkness, your sleeping body is doing all kinds of wonderful things: cells recovering, broken and damaged DNA is being repaired, in your brain, memories are being stored. Your body knows what to do in the dark, if you would power down your devices and trust it.

Of course, not everything sleeps in the dark.

IMAGE: Owl

Some animals are nocturnal: 2/3 of invertebrates, 1/3 of vertebrates, and almost all human teenagers. You hear them, if you pay attention. I’ll be doing the dishes or lying in bed, and hear a call: hooo – hoo – hoohoo! Owl eyes see 100 times more clearly than yours at night. At night, they hunt, mate, carry letters to and from Hogwarts. The animal kingdom is alive in the dark.

Some of you are up in the dark and doing good things, too.

IMAGE: Victorian London at Night

Authors and artists have often worked at night, the altered light and the hushed sounds stir our imagination. We see and hear and perceive and know differently in the darkness.

Charles Dickens took long walks at night. He wrote what he saw on the streets: policemen walking the beat; laughing, drunken partygoers; boys selling muffins to survive; a mother and her daughter begging in the rain with nothing. The dark was alive. Is it any wonder Dickens chose the liminal darkness of Christmas Eve as the time when ghosts would visit to tell old Ebenezer the truth about his past, present, and future?

Other artists have loved the night. Some of Vincent Van Gogh's most famous works are about the colors one sees at night.

IMAGE: Van Gogh's Night Café

His picture "night café" is a scene not unlike one out of Dickens. On the one hand, there is color and vitality and energy at night—but if you look hard, you'll see the colors are garish, almost ugly. The scene is hard—the people are sex workers and drunks. But Van Gogh sympathizes with those in the café—he one of them. Van Gogh's first idea was to share the gospel as a pastor, to preach about the light shining in the darkness. He ended up doing it through painting.

IMAGE: Van Gogh's Starry Night

Of course you know about Starry Night. It's a visual for the spiritual principle that Howard Thurman called the "Luminous Darkness." The darkness that gave birth to the light. The darkness that is not dark at all, that is welcomes those with eyes to see.

Clearly darkness holds something important for those who are willing to pay attention.

IMAGE: Night Road in the Rain

Robert Frost, one of my favorite poets, wrote about paying attention to the dark in a particular poem from his 1928 collection *West Running Brook*. I want to read it to you and ask you what the poet sees and hears as he walks in the dark?

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain - and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.
I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,
But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

What do you see and hear when you walk in the dark? For Frost the darkness is the absence of visible light; it is also more. Frost's father died when he was 11. His first son died of cholera at age 3, he blamed himself for not calling a doctor. He and his wife Elinor had a daughter who died 3 days after birth. Elinor became depressed and they had another miscarriage. Frost's Sister Jeannie died in a mental hospital. Frost's daughter Marjorie, of whom he was fond, died of tuberculosis. Elinor died from heart failure. Frost's son, Carol, who had become depressed, after a long conversation with Frost, took his own life. Frost had to commit his daughter Irma to a mental hospital.

When the poet writes, I have been acquainted with the night, I have outwalked the furthest city light, he is talking about experiences that all of us know: sadness, despair, guilt, numbness. That is where he walks. Out in rain, back in rain, past the farthest light. That is where he stands still, to listen and look for what the darkness has to offer. There, in the dark, the poet displays a curiosity, a willingness to listen. To say the "time is neither wrong nor right." To simply become acquainted with—to befriend—the night.

I know some of you have walked in the darkness.

M. Scott Peck said, "life is difficult." The Buddha said "life is suffering." Nature turns its face into the shadows every day. Our lives move into the shadows, too. Into the dark.

Our plans go sideways.
A beloved dog dies.
The doctor calls with a diagnosis.
Someone we love gets lost in addiction.
Someone we love speaks cruelly to us.
Someone we love leaves, long before they should—long before we stop needing them.

These experiences are as common to life as nightfall. As common as they are, we are nevertheless, often bewildered by them. We are caught unaware. Left speechless.

I wouldn't ever say that we should welcome life's painful experiences. They are not something to revel in—they are hard and confusing.

But I do believe so deeply that suffering is not something we can ever run away from. There is no amount of "artificial" light that we can shine on our lives or each others' lives to chase away all of the shadows. There are no quick fixes, no cheery outlook, no positive thinking—that ever chases the darkness away.

The way out the darkness is in. If the darkness scares you, the best thing to do is to befriend it. To borrow a poet's phrase: "become acquainted with the night."

The darkness does not swallow us up. It doesn't consume us. There is beauty in the darkness. There is truth in the darkness.

You are also not alone in the darkness. As you befriend your own dark, you grow in sympathy with others who are also wandering out past the farthest city light. As you befriend your dark, you grow in sympathy for those who suffer—from violence and injustice, or mental illness, or grief. Instead of looking uncomfortably away, you might draw closer to them. And while we can't fix the darkness for one another—no one's suffering is fixed by flipping a switch and turning on a light, you discover that for you to love someone who is hurting you might keep vigil with them through the night. Jesus calls this kind of love "abiding."

Beloveds of God, know this: darkness is not a curse. Darkness is a place where God abides.

God was in the primordial darkness of Creation, ready to give birth. God came to God's people in the darkness of an Egyptian prison and delivered them. God was in the thick, dark cloud with Moses. God was in the whirlwind with Job. God was in the dark animal stalls with Mary. God was on the cross and in the darkness of the tomb.

Darkness is not some Godforsaken place. Far from it. Being a person of faith is learning to walk in the dark. It is to be one acquainted with the night.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote:

The Uses of Sorrow | Mary Oliver

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)
Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.