

FCCS December 15, 2019
Rev. Curran Reichert

“The Joy of Darkness”
Luke 1:47-55 (NRSV)

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book several years back called “Learning to Walk in the Dark,” that became a best seller. I recently downloaded it as an Audiobook. Her premise is that as we have evolved, humans have gone to great lengths to avoid being in the dark. Although our daily cycle is divided between darkness and light, by surrounding ourselves with street lights, stop lights, city lights and night lights we rarely, if ever, find ourselves in the pitch-black dark. Furthermore, she asserts that our feel-good culture eschews dark emotions and will sell us every manner of solution to help us maintain a perpetually sunny disposition.

Yet, there is one thing Barbara Brown Taylor and everyone in this room knows and which I was reminded of when I put my palm against Michelle’s very pregnant belly this week and felt her baby kick; without darkness there can be no birth. All gestation requires the life-giving darkness of the womb, the egg, or the fertile soil, no life will live to see the light without it.

From a religious perspective, we know that darkness is an integral part of any spiritual path. Who among us has not known what John of the Cross called the *dark night of the soul*? Surely not one of us has made it this far without multiple run ins with the kind darkness that drives us to our knees; be it through shock, or loss, illness, hatred, failure, disillusionment or betrayal. As painful as it is, we have to admit that the most important lessons have come out of the darkest of times. In truth we need the dark, we need it as much as we need the light.

The problem, Barbara Brown Taylor points out, is that there are few people in life who teach us how to navigate the dark. Historically Christianity has been of little help, as it has really never had anything nice to say about the dark. “From the earliest times Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death.”¹

¹ Learning to Walk in the Dark BBT Copywrite 2014 Harper Collins Publishing, Page 6

“At a theological level” she explains, “this creates all kinds of problems. It divides every day in two, pitting light against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving (us) to deal with the rest on (our) own time.”² She rightly points out, that any faith practice that deals with darkness by denying its existence is destined to fall short of expectations when the sun inevitable sets, literally or metaphorically.

The great poet and naturalist Wendell Berry writes, “to know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings.”³

Jesus is referred to as the “Light of the World,” but what is also true is that the season of Advent is ripe with imagery that leans into the darkness and does not shy away from it. Jesus’ journey begins in darkness, his resurrection follows entombment in a dark cave. Each birth and rebirth in the Christian context requires the gifts of darkness.

My favorite passage from the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah, was offered to me at a time when I had lost sight of the light. Isaiah 45:3 reads, “I will give you treasures in the darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.”

Many of the most powerful interactions between God and God’s people come while people are dreaming and available to night visions. Today’s passage, from the book of Mathew, provides plenty of evidence of darkness as a path to transformation.

- Before the people of Israel were safe in the land of Canaan, they wandered long nights in desert.
- Before the hungry were filled with good things, they survived the despair of emptiness and despair.

² IBID, Page 7

³ Selected Poems of Wendell Barry Copyright 1998

- Before Mary rejoices in God's favor, she trembles in fear of the stranger who is ultimately revealed to her as the messenger of God.
- The rich and powerful in this passage were forced to relinquish their wealth and position, surely, they would have to navigate great darkness in pursuit of a path back to meaningful life.

Could it be the very stories that have been interpreted as warnings against the darkness are there to be mined for the sacred gifts that can only be found in the dark?

- Let us look to the shepherds spending their nights in dark pastures with the animals they covenant to protect. Might they teach us something about the tender intimacy shared between caretaker and those in care.
- Perhaps we turn to Mary, who finds her voice of rejoicing by befriending the uncertainty of the unknown, the unfolding, the mystery of God.
- Perhaps we learn from the infant, said to have been born in the darkest of night, with only a star overhead. That innocence represents dependence on God, on the mother, and on the kindness of strangers.

We tend to connect idea of dependency with a kind of dreadful darkness. But the Christmas story is textured throughout with blessings that come from dependency. As it is told, the miracle of Christ's birth is dependent on the grace of God, Mary is dependent on her husband Joseph's protection, the very survival of the Prince of Peace is dependent on the Wise Men choosing to go home by another way. Might a renewed recognition of our dependency on God and interdependency with one another provide us with new insight for living in harmony?

Embracing the darkness that often masks our fear of being vulnerable, allows us to practice spiritual courage. Spiritual courage is what is required in order to navigate darkness. I'll leave you with one more insight from BBT, "to be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. To want a life with only half these things in it is to want half a life." ⁴ May we strive to

⁴Learning to Walk in the Dark BBT Copywrite 2014 Harper Collins Publishing, Page 55

achieve a better balance between light and dark and may this Holy season be yet another graceful invitation into the fullness of life. Amen