

Second Sunday in Advent; Year B (Mark 1:1-8)
The Rev. Devon Anderson
December 6, 2020

Prayer for Light and Dark (Jennifer Phillips)

Light and dark. Dark and light. Through most of the imagery we use in our corporate prayers and liturgies, in much of our scripture, we glean that light is good, and dark is bad. We pray from our Book of Common Prayer, *Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness. Shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit and protect us from all perils and dangers of the night.* A few Sundays before Advent we read from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: *But you, beloved, are not in darkness...for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.* And in our Advent collects: *Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.* Over and over and over – light is good, dark is bad. Bad things happen in the dark. Dark is where evil lurks, where suffering happens, where we get lost and scared and confused. God brings light to our darkness. God is light. Light is wholeness, happiness, restoration, grace.

And yet – and yet – the season of Advent (those four weeks directly before the festival of Christmas) is, in its essence, a season of darkness and in darkness. We begin at the end of November -- solidly in the dark as the daylight shortens and nightfall descends earlier and earlier. We end our virtual work and school days in the dark, eat dinner in the dark, wake to the dark. We begin our church year, every year, in darkness and though we round the bend of the winter solstice toward the end of the season, the increase of daylight is too miniscule to notice. Could it be that darkness is part of the whole, the inseparable twin of light? Could it be that the two belong together, forming a symbiotic relationship, both created by God, both required for a rich, deep life of faith? In her 2014 book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me – either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love. At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their liar. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.*

So this morning, I offer to you a defense of darkness: an apology, of sorts, for the other half of creation, for the avoided, feared, misunderstood spiritual power of the night.

We begin, as always, with the Gospel and how interesting it is, and maybe not a coincidence, that the first voice we hear, the first call to us in the season of Advent, at the very beginning of Mark's account – that first voice - is from John the Baptist calling us out into the dark, still desert. Have you ever wondered why they went? Why the people left Jerusalem in droves and ventured out into the thick darkness of the desert to meet John the Baptist? Especially people from the shiny bright city of Jerusalem, where the temple was, and the rabbis, and all the accumulated wisdom of the religious establishment. If someone wanted to hear from God, why not stay right there, maybe attend some extra services or make an appointment with a chief priest? Anyone who would turn away from all that and set

off for the wilderness was looking for something else, something the glare of the temple could not, or would not, supply.

And why would they leave the epicenter of the religious life for a man like John? Everything I know about him makes me think I would have gone out of my way *not* to see him. Self-appointed prophets tend to plant themselves right in our way so we have to cross to the other side of the street to avoid them. They get in our face and dare us to ignore them. But John – he planted himself in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, squarely in the dark. He set up shop in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say had to go to a lot of trouble to get there, borrowing the neighbor’s donkey or setting off on foot with enough water for the journey, which led down dark and lonely desert trails infested with bandits and wild animals. The people Israel left the light for the dark. They left what they knew for what they did not know to meet this uncivilized creature in camel fir screaming repentance and calling them names.

And all I can ask is: why? John was from another planet, but he spoke about the one who was coming as if he were repeating what God was saying to him right that moment, one sentence at a time. He did not know the name of the one who was coming, or what he looked like, but he knew that the old world was about to end and a new world was spinning toward him, carried in the arms of God’s chosen one. It was a world that would be built out of new materials, not the rearranged stones of the old ways. Maybe the Holy Spirit had gotten all but covered up in the glare of Jerusalem, with pretend piety and temple taxes and priestly hocus-pocus. The flame was all but snuffed out, so God moved it – out into the wilderness, out into the darkness, where the air was sharp and clean, out under the stars where it was fanned by the most socially unacceptable character anyone could imagine. Into the darkness they went – to meet the hope, to meet the possibility of a fresh start, or a new kind of freedom. It was anything but orderly. It was anything but safe. But for those people that went out to meet John, the darkness was their best chance, their golden ticket to discover anew the living God.

It is in darkness that the people meet God. Yes, there are about a hundred references to darkness in the Bible which portray light as life and darkness as death. But that’s not the whole story about darkness. Again, our faith is a complex both/and, not a simple either/or. And once we start noticing how many important things in scripture which happen at night, the list grows fast. *I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places*, wrote the prophet Isaiah, *so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name* (45:3). God leads Abraham, bereft and childless, outside to look at the stars, “Count the stars if you are able,” God tells him, “so shall your descendants be.” Later God comes to Abraham’s grandson Jacob in a dream. Jacob meets God there, in the darkest hour before dawn, and God says more or less the same thing he said to Abraham, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Jacob’s son Joseph meets God in dreams at night – so much so that he captures a pharaoh’s attention, graduating from the dungeon to the palace to become the royal interpreter of dreams. The exodus from Egypt happens at night. God parts the Red Sea at night. Manna falls from the sky in the wilderness at night, and to Moses – “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud,” God says to Moses, “in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and trust you ever after.” The cloud is a darkness that has nothing to do with the time of day – it’s an unnatural darkness that reveals the divine presence. Centuries later St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Moses’s vision began with light. Afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.”

And this is just the beginning...we know Jesus was born in darkness, at a bleak and dark time in human history, born under the stars that pointed the way. So much of Jesus' teaching about God happened over dinner tables and late night talks. Jesus himself met God, alone, in the dark of night when he went off to pray. We know that Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross in darkness, bathed it with sweet oils and prepared it for burial. We know that God met Jesus in resurrection in darkness, and it was discovered by the women, in the darkest hour before dawn.

It is in darkness that the people meet God. In our scriptures we see that 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 of these things in it is to want half a life, shutting the other half away where it will not interfere with one's bright fantasies of the way things ought to be.

And it's not just our spiritual forebears, characters in the biblical stories who meet God in darkness. It's us, too. It's in dark times and in dark moments that God often meets us with epiphanies and revelation, with comfort and relief. I've just finished David Sedaris' new and collected essays entitled, "This is Me." Most all of the essays I've read before either in his books or publications in the *New Yorker*. But at the very, very end is a stunning essay about the death of his father. The family – all the Sedaris adult kids – have gathered at their father's bedside in the last days. Writes Sedaris:

"David," he said as if he just realized who I was, "you've accomplished so many fantastic things in your life. I want to tell you, you, you.....won."

A moment later he asked for more water and drifted mid-sip into that neither here nor there state. Paul arrived and I went for a walk, thinking about my father, and about the writer Russell Baker who had died a few weeks earlier. He and I had had the same agent, a man named Don Congdon who was in his mid-70s when I met him in 1994....

"Rus Baker's mother was a tough old bird," Don told me one rainy afternoon in his office off Fifth Avenue, "a real gone-gone to hear him tell it, always insisting that her son was a hack and would never amount to anything. So on her death bed he goes to her saying, 'Ma, look! I made it! I'm a successful writer for the New York Times and my last book won the Pulitzer.' She looked up at him, her expression blank and said, 'Who are you?'"

I've been told since that the story may not be true but it struck a nerve with me. Seek approval from the one person you desperately want it from, and you're guaranteed not to get it. As for my Dad, I couldn't tell if he meant "you won" as in "you won the game of life" or "you won over me, your father who told you, who assured you when you were small and then kept reassuring you that you are worthless." Whichever way he intended those two faint words I will take them. And in doing so, throw down this lance I've been hoisting for the past 60 years. For I am old myself now and it is so very, very heavy.

God meets us in the dark – and this is the surprising truth we proclaim this strange and unusual Advent season, as we await the savior to be born again among us. Yesterday a band of merry parishioners greened the outside of our church building – and it is glorious. What I most love about the design – which took weeks to plan and organize -- is that it is its most fully beautiful in the darkness. As the sun sets, and the sky turns from blue to gray to black, lights come on inside the church, illuminating the chapel's stained-glass windows from inside. Timed lights in solar candles in gorgeous red lanterns begin to glow. Lighted Christmas trees sparkle, inviting passers-by to wrap themselves in cozy blankets on our benches and delight. Inviting signs, bursting planters, swags and wreaths and bows adorn our space – a physical witness to the glory and hope of God – made all the most pronounced against the backdrop of night. At Trinity this year, we meet God in the darkness.

“In my sleep I dreamed this poem,” writes Mary Oliver, “Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness/It took me years to understand/that this, too, was a gift.” This Advent let us make friends with the darkness, the second half of the whole, that holds creation together, where beginnings and endings touch, and in whose shadow all things are made new. AMEN.

Sources:

Simple Prayers for Complicated Lives, Jennifer Phillips, pp.46-7.

Learning to Walk in the Darkness, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 5, pp.44-8, p.55.

As Irish poet, priest, and philosopher John O’Donohue writes,

A lot of the experiences we have in the world are torn, broken, hard experiences, and in broken, difficult, lonesome experiences you earn a quality of light that is very precious... When you come through a phase of pain or isolation or suffering, the light that is given to you at the end of that is a very precious light, and really when you go into something similar again, it is the only kind of light that can mind you. It is the lantern that will bring you through that pain... you should allow that light to come round you to awaken the presence that is in you, to calm you, to bring you contentment, and as well to bring you courage.

John O’Donohue and John Quinn, *Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for a Modern World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 151-52.