

Christmas Eve Year B
December 24, 2017
Luke 1: 1-20

*O holy Wisdom: Fill us this day with joy, understanding and grace,
that we may tell out the wonder of your love; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Merry Christmas!

On this most holy night, we gather to hear a sacred story, one that is familiar,
retold to remind us of the reason we celebrate, the reason we gather,
the essence of this season.

And Welcome!

Welcome whether this is your church home week in and week out
or you are visiting for the first time,
we're glad that you are here
and happy to be celebrating this holy and blessed occasion together.

Christmas comes to us at one of the darkest times of the year.

Last Thursday being the Winter Solstice,
the day in which we saw the least amount of daylight of any day in the year.
On Thursday, the sun came up at 7:55 am and set at 4:20 pm.
Today, the sun rose at 7:56 and set at 4:22.

In a few shorts days, we gained three minutes of daylight.

And for those of us who have lived in this part of the world awhile,
we know that's how it goes and it's something. Every little bit helps.

During this time of year, we learn to rest in the darkness, to sit with it, and find comfort in it.

These past few weeks of Advent,

I taught a class based upon Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.
Steeping ourselves in darkness and themes of darkness made for fruitful discussion
as we prepared our hearts for Christmas.

One woman described the dark Seattle nights as comforting,
feeling as if she could wrap the darkness around herself like a blanket.

Others in the class came because they struggle with the dark
and find these months to be challenging.

For a moment, consider how you experience the dark.

Is it welcome and familiar or something which you chase off with lights and distraction?

We not only confronted our feelings and experiences having to do with literal dark,
but also considered emotional and spiritual darkness as well.

As we dove deeper and deeper into this topic,

I was amazed to realize how much darkness is prevalent in scripture and story
which I had glossed over before.

It is appropriate that we welcome the Christ child and begin our Christmas celebration
in the dark, with candlelight.

As Taylor says in her book,

“New life starts in the dark.

Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb,
or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark” (129).

This infant Jesus which we re-member this night

came into the world in darkness from a womb into a cave into his mother’s arms.

This infancy narrative,

the story of Jesus coming into the world takes place under the cloak of darkness.

Young Joseph and Mary are searching for somewhere safe to sleep,
somewhere to stay for the night

when Mary goes into labor and gives birth to her child.

In days without electricity, they used light sparingly in the dark hours

and spent a lot of time in an in between state of consciousness, a dreamlike state,
often waking for a couple hours in the middle of the night
simply resting and thinking.

If they did have any light, it came from something like this. ***

This is a first-century oil lamp which would have given off a faint light.

In those days, families often lived in existing caves

or in simple two-level structures with animals on the bottom and people living on top.

Mary and Joseph could have found room in either of these locations,
either the bottom floor of a family home to be shared with their livestock
or a cave.

Regardless, this miraculous mystery took place in darkness.

The shepherds also witnessed a miracle in the dark with the visitation of the angels.

Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, appeared to them

not at noonday, or even at dawn or dusk, but under the cover of darkness.

The text tells us the glory of the Lord *shone* around them and they were terrified.

Was the glory of the Lord light shining? Could it be seen? Did it light up that field?
Or was it more of a feeling?

When God appeared to Moses it was in a cloud of thick darkness called *araphel* in the Hebrew.

This thick darkness revealed the divine presence even while obscuring it,
the same way the brightness of God’s glory does (47).

And the first thing the angel says is what angels always say in greeting to humans, “Fear not.”

“Fear not” whether their arrival was in a blinding array of light upon a darkened field
or a spiritual force of darkness,

araphel announcing the divine presence

to a group of scruffy shepherds and their sheep on the outskirts of town.

Ultimately, we need the darkness just as much as we need the light.

Without it, we are imbalanced. Without darkness, we wouldn’t notice the light.

Taylor's book talks about an interesting phenomenon experienced in some faith traditions which she calls "full solar spirituality."

She is critical of this because that's not the reality of our lives.
Full solar Christianity places upon us the expectation that we will be loving Jesus,
smiling all the time, singing Kumbaya,
and spreading the good news to everyone we meet.
This approach to faith doesn't allow for grief, or failure, doubt or despair.
This happy clappy personal relationship with our Lord and Savior
denies the dark night of the soul.

As Taylor describes her own losing battle with this type of faith, she writes,

"Spiritual darkness was like a mist that could seep under any door,
rise through the cracks in any floorboards.
I could not swing a stick at it or get away from it by running.
My only defense was to keep the light of Christ burning brightly inside me,
which meant reading the Bible, going to church,
and praying every day so that the lamp of my faith did not go out" (43).

THAT is exhausting and unsustainable when the darkness sets in which is what she found out.

On the other hand, what if we are to embrace a faith that hearkens back to the birth of Christ,
back to the creation of the world when the light was separated from the darkness.

What if we embrace a more natural **lunar spirituality**,
a faith which ebbs and flows along with the cycles of life?

That I believe is more authentic, more real,
and more truthful to who we are as beloved humans created in God's image.

A lunar spirituality can be dark and quiet
or shining brighter than a thousand stars in the sky.

It is fluid and changing, transforming in phases just as the moon does in our night sky.

I don't know about you, but this kind of faith feels a lot more real to me.

This faith can be palpably felt on a dim night like tonight
and lit up like a candle by a visitation of an angel.

Someone shared a prayer with me recently that goes like this:

God of darkness as well as light, help us to embrace all that we are.

We want to dispel the darkness, the shadows we find within ourselves.

*Help us rather to bring these poles of light and darkness into unity and learn to be whole,
perfectly ourselves, made in your image.*

This encapsulates it beautifully – God who is both light and dark – who loves us no matter what.

When we would rather hide or ignore the unseemly parts of ourselves,
our shadow sides and darkness,

God helps us bring together these warring aspects of self.

God aids us in finding unity and wholeness.

That is what Christmas is about,

helping us find restored unity and wholeness in ourselves,
in others, and the world around us.

Joy to the World!