

Faith in the Fog

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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The Longest Night
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Psalm 139:1-12

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me. ²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. ⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," ¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

It was September of 1814. A lawyer and poet named Francis Scott Key was being held on a ship in the Baltimore Harbor as the British forces attacked Ft. McHenry. Through the twilight, Key could make out the outline of the fort, see that the flag of a young America still flew, but then darkness fell. It was, in fact, a dark and stormy night. Through the flash of bombs bursting and the rockets' red glare, he tried to see, but there was no way to know for sure which way things were going. He spent a restless night waiting and worrying and keeping watch, until by dawn's early light, he saw that the flag still flew, that our flag, spangled with stars, still waved over the fort: a sign of battle won and a symbol of hope and promise for our country's future.

The anthem that Francis Scott Key wrote after that experience, the Star Spangled Banner, stirs us for many reasons, not the least of which is the way it depicts that time between twilight's last gleaming and the dawn's early light, that experience we have all had of being awake in the dark – waiting and watching, tossing and turning, not knowing and the nagging doubt and fear, and underneath it all, a tender, persistent thread of hope:

that all will be well,
that good shall prevail,
that justice will be served,
that the lost will be found,
that a light will shine
and we will all be led forth out of darkness.

The first time I remember being awake in the night like that, I was five or six years old in a tent cabin in the Camp Curry campground in the Yosemite Valley. All around me, members of my family slept soundly: my mother and my father, and my two brothers, but not me. All night long, or so it seemed, I lay awake, stiff with fear, listening to the crunch crunch on gravel as bears passed by in the night, right outside the thin flap of canvas that was the only thing that stood between us and certain death.

I was desperate for morning,
for the grownups to wake up,
for the relief of light

and a return to life as usual.

In the morning, I learned that our cabin sat right on the path leading to the bathroom. The bears turned out to be simply people with tiny bladders. On the other hand, there had also been a bear in the night, on a rampage, savaging trash cans and laying food lockers to waste. Which is just to say that sometimes the night time peril is real and not simply our imagination run amok.

Anyway, this is my first memory of being awake in the night. There are others. You have them too. We all have them - awake in emergency rooms or hospital waiting areas; stuck in airports or a train stations; glued to the TV waiting for late night election results then unable to sleep after. In our own beds, we lie awake, worrying about ourselves or someone we love, or the general sorry state of the world. Nights filled with grief or bleak hours of quiet despair.

In the dark of night, it seems as though everything that we've been holding back, every feeling, every fear, seems to come flooding in.

This experience of nighttime distress is so common that it has come to serve as a metaphor for times of spiritual suffering as well. It is called "The Dark Night of the Soul," and it refers to periods of doubt and despair, times of isolation and alienation in which we feel cutoff

from God,
from others,
and even from ourselves,
even in the waking hours,
for days and nights on end.

So, if you have been feeling inadequate, as though you are failing in your faith, here is some good news: you are not the only one. Not by a long shot. The dark night of the soul is a common experience.

Not only is it common, spiritual teachers tell us that it is necessary. The dark night of the soul can be an invaluable mechanism for spiritual growth. It can serve as a portal to usher us into new and profound experiences of the presence of God.

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor, says:

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 lair. 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.

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What kinds of things might we learn in the dark? What kinds of things will save our lives?

We learn this: that we are, in fact, vulnerable. Despite our very best efforts, we cannot fully protect ourselves and those we love from the hurts and hardships that are inevitable in every human life.

We learn that our ability to influence and control our environment is limited on the inside and out. In the dark night of the soul, we find that we do not triumph through the power of positive thinking,
the sheer force of will,
our good character,
our best behavior or an abundance of resources.

In short, a dark night will bring us to our knees, and that is exactly where we need to be. We are humbled. We hand over the reins. We turn to God and reconnect with the Source and Salvation of our being.

There are often voices that call to us in the night, sensations in our bodies, all vying for our attention. Usually, we try to shut them up. They're unpleasant and it's so uncomfortable. But if we can pay attention, if we can be a little curious about just what in the heck is going on, if we can listen at a deep level, something will be revealed to us – something that we need to know, something that we need to face, something that we need to tend. This is the Holy Spirit at work, that rascally Jesus pushing and poking and prodding to make sure you stay awake and don't miss your life.

So awake up and pay attention, but do it with care. There's a saying: Your mind is like a bad neighborhood. You don't want to go in there alone. But, with the help of friends, or therapists, or pastors or spiritual directors, we can learn and grow, we can heal and become more whole-hearted. God will take us where we need to go, like it or not.

In the dark night we awake to our need for community. We hunger for the light and warmth to be found in human relationship. We gather together because we are stronger together. We know our need of one another. Lennon and McCartney had it right: we get by with a little help from our friends.

And in the end, the dark night calls up in us our deepest longings, evokes in us the desire for a different kind of world,

for a life characterized by the qualities of both justice and mercy,
in which the sick are healed,
the lame walk,
the oppressed set free,
and the dead raised up –
where there are no more tears
and the lion lies down with the lamb,
in other words,
the Kingdom of God.

In the dark of night, we look for the light-- the Light of the World.

It turns out, that the very aspects of darkness that we dread are the exact same ones that position us to see the star,

to hear those angel voices,
and to recognize the Son of God,
who is always showing up in the most unexpected of ways.

In the cherished story of the nativity, consider the conditions of those who see Jesus:

The shepherds, who are trying to make a living in a cold desert in the dead of night, while others are tucked up in the warmth and comfort of home.

The kings, in contrast with the shepherds, possess every material thing a person needs, yet they perch on precarious camels and wander the desert searching for something or someone greater to serve than themselves.

There is a pregnant, unwed teen mother about to give birth in smelly and unsanitary stable, without the support of her mother or any midwife. That first Christmas, like many of us, Mary was separated from those she loved most dear.

And then there is Joseph, a young man in love with a woman who claims to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit; Joseph, a man who can only be seen as a fool, or as someone touched by God.

Each person in this divine drama is suffering, struggling with some aspect of the human condition – poor, poor of spirit, lonely, separated from loved ones, rejected, physically challenged -- and yet these are the very people who see Jesus, who not only see Jesus, but recognize him for who he is. They recognize Jesus, not in spite of their suffering, but because that suffering has readied them, opened their eyes to behold a God who comes, not in a blaze of heavenly glory, but slips in among us in the deepest dark of earthly night.

The dark night of the soul can help grow us spiritually, but this is not a truth to wield lightly, and certainly not as a way to minimize human suffering.

My friend, Ben Johnston-Krase, was recently diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. He posted some remarks about spiritual platitudes, the things we say that go straight for redemption and skip over the pain of a personal cross.

I want to be clear," Ben says, "the space around my family needs to be a "no-crappy-theology-zone." Things like "Everything happens for a reason," "All part of God's plan," and "God won't give us more than we can handle" may be helpful for some, but I would prefer not to inflict them on my girls.

The dark night of the soul can deepen our faith, but it is a painful process. We call it the dark night, but scripture offers other images, each as bad as the next.

The valley of the shadow of death.

The dry bones.

The belly of the whale.

The refiner's fire.

The burning of chaff.

Death as a necessary precursor of resurrection.

The losing of one's life to find it.

None of these are fun,

And few of us go through these portals of suffering willingly.

But God will take us where we need to go.

Just remember:

if you are experiencing a time of spiritual darkness,
it does not mean that you have lost your way;
more likely you are on the way,
because the path leads from Bethlehem to Jerusalem,
from cradle to cross, and only then
to infinity and beyond.

There are a few tips for those journeying in the dark.

Take a light.

Find a light.

Be a light.
Look for a star.
Light a candle.
Shoot a flare.
If you don't have a candle or a lighter, beam your iphone.

Let us gather all the little bits of light together,
until we have enough to spark a fire,
or send a search beam in the sky.

In her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott has this to say about making your way in the dark

'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you. This is right up there with the best advice on writing, or life, I have ever heard."

Tonight is the night of the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere, the longest night of the entire year. Tonight, the astrological tide turns. For thousands of years, people have gathered on this night to chase away the dark-

not by magic, nor even by ritual,
but in the simple act of coming together,
coming together to shine a light,
to light a path, to point the way,
to repeat the promises and affirm our faith,
and to encourage one another
until, at last, we come into the light of God's new day. We affirm that God is with us even in the darkest, longest night of all.

"Even when light fades and darkness falls," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "As it does every single day, in every single life – God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and

no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down – but whether you decide to trust the witness of those who have gone before you, or you decide to do whatever it takes to become a witness yourself; here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.”

Or, in the words of my friend, Ben:

Finally, I believe now that the Sacred Source of the Universe, God, who I have come to name and respond to in Jesus Christ – this Source is sad, mad, and broken with me, but also courageous, hopeful, healing, and still calling.

This is the testimony of faith: that the Sacred Source of the Universe, whom we name and respond to in Jesus Christ,
is God with us,
God with us this night,
every night,
every moment,
every day:
courageous, hopeful, healing, and still calling.

Jesus, come to light the way.