

Adjusting to the Dark

The time change this year has seemed especially harsh. Maybe it is always that way, but I feel as though my inner time clock has just recently made the adjustment. Sure, I like that the sun comes up shortly after I wake up in the morning. But I don't like leaving work at night and having to turn my headlights on my car. Of course, this is not all the time change's fault. The days are growing shorter (that's an odd phrase, isn't it?); there is less light, more dark.

Today is also the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of a new church year. Advent is the season when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas. We know that Jesus wasn't born December 25th. We're not exactly sure when he was born. So why do we celebrate December 25th? The early church picked it as the day to celebrate because it is the day of the winter solstice, an ancient pagan celebration that comes shortly after the darkest day of the year.

In other words, the choice of December 25th is a theological one, not a historical one. Our tradition chooses the darkest time of the year to celebrate the coming of Jesus, whom the Gospel of John calls the light of the world. What does this mean? That seems like a question worth exploring in Advent.

Walking in the Dark

And that is precisely what we will be doing, using Barbara Brown Taylor's newest book, [*Learning to Walk in the Dark*](#) as our guide and companion.

In it, she explores darkness as not something for us to avoid, but to explore. There is spiritual richness there, she contends.

*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 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 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.**¹*

According to scripture, God created the darkness just as God created the light. We spend half of our lives in the dark, although we've invented all sorts of artificial means of keeping the lights on. What if instead of reacting out of fear, we allowed ourselves to be curious? What if, instead of turning on the lights, we explored the dark?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (Harper One: 2014) 4-5.

Reconsidering our Language

But before we go on, we must consider the problem of our language a bit. I want to show you a clip from a Martin Luther King Jr. speech.

MLK Jr: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGtjAaJeUWY> (starting at 1:19 to end).

Somebody told a lie one day. They couched it in language. They made everything black, ugly and evil. Look in your dictionary and see the synonyms of the word "black." It's always something degrading and low and sinister. Look at the word, "white." It's always some pure, high and. I want to get the language so right that everybody here will cry out, "Yes I'm Black and I'm proud of it. I'm Black and I'm beautiful."

We have a language problem. We like to think in terms of binaries. Dark is bad. Light is good. This creates all sorts of problems. Barbara Brown Taylor recognizes this. She writes,

It divides every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own time. It implies things about dark-skinned people and sight-impaired people that are not true. Worst of all, it offers people of faith a giant closet in which they can store everything that threatens or frightens them without thinking too much about those things.²

Defeating Dualism with Imagination

Bad things can happen in the light, just as well as the dark. Good things can happen in the day just as well as the night. As Taylor points out in this clip, a lot of our pronouncements of what is good and what is bad have to do with where we freeze the frame: <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/defeating-dualism-with-imagination> (start at beginning play to 1:19).

What is the Dark Saying?

The task is to use our imagination to break down the binaries, to defeat dualism. When we do that, when we stop viewing the dark as something to be feared and avoided, we can begin to ask helpful questions of it. Such as, what is God saying to us in the darkness that we cannot hear in the light?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the darkness has much to offer if we can sit with it and explore it for a bit. She asks,

What can you learn about your fear of it by staying with it for a moment before turning on the lights? Where can you feel the fear in your body? When have you felt that way before? What are you afraid is going to happen to you, and what is your mind telling you to do about it? What stories do you tell yourself to keep your fear in place? What helps you stay conscious even when you are afraid? What have you learned in the dark that you could never have learned in the light?³

² Taylor, 7.

³ Taylor, 185.

The Sun Will Be Darkened, The Moon Will Not Give Its Light

This seems like an odd way to prepare for Christmas doesn't it? But our tradition chose this time of the year precisely because it is the darkest.

Furthermore, our scripture lesson for today presents us with the theme. Mark 13: 24

*'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light...*

The World As It Is, The World As It Should Be

Mark 13 is an example of apocalyptic literature. You may remember apocalypse means revealed. The idea isn't that it is predicting some dark and distant future, but it is peeling back the curtain on the present to reveal what is really happening below the surface.

The language of apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic and coded, because the people who wrote it and read it were questioning the way things were around them in some very dangerous ways. They wondered if the people with power, the people who were in charge were really the best people for the job. They looked at the world around them and noted the injustice. They paid attention to the pain. They noted the world as it was and used their faith and imagination to picture it as it could and perhaps should be. This faith and imagination, this willingness to note the dissonance between things as they are and should be, is the first step in becoming active participants and co-workers with God in the transformation of the world.

Advent's Call: Keep Awake!

That is Advent's call for us as well. Mark 13: 37

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Advent's call is to keep awake, to pay attention, to explore the dark within and without. The darkness is not to be avoided, but explored. God created the day and the night. There are treasures and pitfalls in each.

So as we prepare ourselves for the coming of the light of the world this Advent, let us not be too quick to dismiss the darkness. Instead of reaching for the light switch, let us sit in the dark for a little while and allow it to teach us its lessons.

Advent is our time to walk in the darkness, to face our fears, to explore its hidden depths, to befriend its mysteries. It is a time to remember that darkness is not the opposite of the light, merely its counterpart, its dancing partner, the yin to its yang. Without it, the light of the world literally could not shine.

You know, I've always thought it was the light's job to eliminate the darkness, but perhaps I was wrong—perhaps that is a lie we have been told—maybe it simply reveals its hidden beauty!