

### **Walking in the Dark**

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of walking in the dark with her young friend Anna.<sup>1</sup> Taylor lives on a farm in rural Georgia. They keep some livestock there. She needed to move the young chickens from one pen to another. This is a job best done at night, Taylor informs. During the day they scream and run around, throwing themselves against the wire, crashing into each other, threatening to have a heart attack and die on the spot. But at night, she says, it is like they have had two martinis. They chuckle when you walk in, stumble around slowly and remain calm when you pick them up.

And so Taylor invites Anna who lives in the big, bright city, on this nighttime adventure to move the chickens. The first thing this requires is walking from the house to the chicken coup, a path Taylor knows well and walks in the dark often.

The moon was bright the night Taylor is remembering but she brings her flashlight anyway. She walks ahead of Anna, using the flashlight to light the way for her.

"I can't see," Anna complains.

"Your eyes will get used to the dark in a minute," Taylor tries to reassure. She continues to walk.

A few seconds later Taylor asks Anna, "Isn't this great?" Then she realizes no one is there to answer. Anna is no longer with her. Where did she go?

She turns back and follows the path back to find her sitting in the grass, crying, immobilized by fear.

Taylor writes, "It was not her fault. It was mine, for forgetting that she was a city girl and that walking in the dark takes some practice. But it was also the fault of everyone who taught her to fear the dark, convincing her that it is dangerous—all of it, all of the time, under every circumstance—that what she cannot see will almost certainly hurt her and that the best way to protect herself from such unseen maleficence is to stay inside after dark with the doors locked and sleep with the lights on."

### **Learning to Fear**

You and I are like Anna. We have learned to fear the dark. We are taught to fear that which we cannot see. Our language reveals our prejudice. Everything that is light or white is equated with good. Everything black or dark is equated with bad.

Taylor wants us to move away from the binaries, from dualistic language. She writes, "Christian teaching thrives on dividing reality into opposed pair: good/evil, church/world, spirit/flesh, sacred/profane, light/dark." But what if "those pairs exist in balance, not opposition?"

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (Harper One: 2014) 33-35.

## **Our Advent Messenger**

This Advent, with the guidance Barbara Brown Taylor's newest book [\*Learning to Walk in the Dark\*](#), we have been considering that darkness is the messenger that is helping us prepare the way of the Lord, in the words of our text from Mark this morning.

John was certainly an odd messenger. He made people uncomfortable with his dress and language of repentance. Being in his presence was disturbing.

Likewise, this Advent we are considering the possibility that darkness is our Advent messenger, that those places we have been taught to fear might not be dangerous all the time and in all circumstances; that if we can tolerate it long enough, if we can allow it to speak to us, we may find words that we need to hear.

Consider this: the good news that we proclaim at Christmas is that the light shines IN THE DARKNESS. Notice, it is not the light of day, but the light that comes to us during the darkness. Notice also, while John does assure us that the "darkness does not overcome it," nowhere does it say that the darkness goes away (John 1:5). The darkness is essential to the good news of Christmas.

### **Where Can I Go From Your Spirit?**

The witness of scripture testifies that God is just as present with us in the dark as in the light. In Psalm 139 we read:

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

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 practice walking in the dark? What treasures might we find?

### **Treasures in the Dark**

We identified quite a few treasures of the dark last week. In our Time for All God's Children, we talked about stars, campfires, fireworks and Halloween.

In Common Time, participants had a chance to explore and write down reflections on darkness.

Here are just a few:

*"Darkness provides space for imagination."*

*"Darkness can be restful."*

*"Sharing darkness has opened the doors to compassionate ones."*

*"I've learned that it isn't always all one thing...there can be darkness and light at the same time. You need one in order to have the other."*

*"If darkness is cold, it enhances my awareness of warmth. If darkness is lonely, it enhances the joy of my time spent with others. If darkness is quiet, it soothes the bustle of everyday life."*

### **Learning to Trust**

As people of faith we are called to learn to trust God in all circumstances. Like Barbara Brown Taylor and her friend Anna, we must learn to walk in the dark, to trust God and follow, even when we cannot see the way.

This is who we are. We are Advent people; people of the dark and the light, simultaneously. Both are true at the same time.

In her book *The Tentmaker*, Michelle Blake writes,

*One of the essential paradoxes of Advent: that while we wait for God, we are with God all along, that while we need to be reassured of God's arrival, or the arrival of our homecoming, we are already at home. While we wait, we have to trust, to have faith, but it is God's grace that gives us that faith. As with all spiritual knowledge, two things are true, and equally true, at once. The mind can't grasp paradox; it is the knowledge of the soul.*

### **The Food that Makes Us Hungry**

When we come to this table we enter into this reality of being home, yet yearning for the fullness of God's reign. Here we experience a foretaste of God's reality, where all are one, where prejudice, greed, pain and violence are no more. This foretaste gives us the courage and vision to work for the transformation of the world. It gives us courage to sit in our own darkness and to sit with those who dwell in deep darkness.

Another way to say it is that it is here we receive food and drink that makes us hungry for justice and thirsty for transformation.

This meal, it is a meal not for the body or mind, but for the soul. The soul, that which can hold on to two seemingly opposites at once, and hold them together in a more whole vision of reality. Not black and white apart, but together. Not light and dark separately, but at the same time. Not fear and trust in opposition, but working together, teaching us to walk in the dark, to follow where we cannot fully see, one precious step at a time. Amen.