

## The Spirituality of Darkness

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

Exodus 19: 16-20 -- On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. <sup>19</sup> As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. <sup>20</sup> When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Today we continue our spirituality of...sermon series. The last two weeks, we've talked about the spirituality of presence and the spirituality of peace. Today, we will talk about the spirituality of darkness. First, let me recommend to you Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. This sermon is incredibly indebted to that book.

It's interesting to pair spirituality and darkness because so often darkness is portrayed as bad. If you've ever had small children, they have likely been afraid of the dark at some point. Both of our kids – Nina when she was younger, and Julian still today will sometimes crawl in bed with Mary Page and me and tell us she's scared. When we ask what they're scared of, they often said, "the dark."

What's interesting is that I don't think we've done anything to instill that fear into either of them. We sometimes go on walks at night. We don't make them come inside just because the sun is going down. We've taken them camping. But for whatever reasons, there's something inside us where we just seem to feel that the darkness is not as safe as the light.

Our kids are certainly not alone in making that assumption. Much of our scriptures operate out of the dualistic assumption that light is good and darkness is bad. Paul talks about being children of the light not of the darkness. Jesus says I'm the light of the world. In the creation story in Genesis, darkness represents chaos and light is the beginning of order.

But that's not the whole story....

Incredible things happen in the dark in Scripture. When Abraham begins to doubt God's promise that his offspring will be a great nation, God takes him outside to look at the stars in the night sky. Both Jacob and Joseph have dreams at night that became seminal moments in the history of the Israelites. The Hebrew people escape slavery in Egypt in the dark. The wise men found the baby Jesus by following a star at night. In each of these stories, there was

something profound going on, but it was always mysterious and a little uncertain and even a little scary. And perhaps that is why we need a spirituality of darkness so much.

It is so easy to equate faith with certainty, to reduce faith to simplistic platitudes. But faith and certainty are not the same thing. In fact, if we are certain of something, there's no need for faith. C.S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia* speaks of the mystery and even fear of faith in a conversation between Mr. Beaver and one of the children Susan about Aslan (the lion who is the Jesus figure in the novels) –

"Aslan is a lion- the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

We have a God who asked Abraham and Sarah to leave the only home they've ever known, who asked Moses and Miriam to free slaves by taking on the greatest military power of the day, who asked Mary to become an unwed pregnant teenager in a society that might kill such women, who asked Jesus to love even those who would kill him, who asked the early Christians to share all of their possessions with the poor.

Faith is risky business.

The way forward is rarely certain, and God is always mysterious, never fully in reach of human comprehension and understanding.

I was reminded of these elements of faith and doubt, risk and beauty several years ago during the total solar eclipse of 2017. Did any of you drive to see it in its totality? We did and it probably one of the most stunningly beautiful and mysterious things I have ever encountered. As the moon gradually covered the sun, the world around us became darker and darker. Animals that only come out at night began to emerge. And then totality happened. It was dark – with only the halo of the sun showing – in the middle of the day. Up unto that moment, my family and I were talking, laughing, having a good time. But in totality, we just all somehow knew to be quiet. It was a holy moment...but it was also dangerous. People have severely damaged their eyes by looking at the sun in an eclipse. That's why we wore those weird glasses. Most of the time, moments of profound beauty are not fully safe because beauty cannot be sanitized or tamed. Neither can God or God's creation. We have a mysterious God whose Spirit calls to us – the same Spirit that Jesus says blows to and fro and cannot be controlled. Faith is beautiful, but it is not safe.

The book of Exodus also tells us a story where darkness comes in the middle of the day.

Moses has led the people out of Egypt and they are wondering in the wilderness when it is time for God to make covenant with the people – to give them the law and the ten commandments. God has summoned Moses up to the top of the mountain, but only Moses is able to go – he's the only one who has such a relationship with God that he alone can survive meeting God in the

dark. The mountain Moses is to climb is covered in a dense cloud with peels of thunder and lightening...it is a scene that seems more like the lair of a villain – maybe Mordor in Lord of the Rings – than the place to meet a loving God. In the book I mentioned earlier, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor says about this passage:

“The darkness that dominates this story has nothing to do with what time of day it is. It is an entirely unnatural darkness – both dangerous and divine – that contains the presence of the God before whom there are no others. This thick darkness reveals the divine presence even while obscuring it, the same way the brightness of God’s glory does. Both are signs of God’s mercy, since ordinary human beings are not equipped to survive direct contact with the divine, in the dark or in the light. This darkness is dangerous but it is also as sure a sign of God’s presence as brightness is, which makes the fear of it different than the fear of say snakes and robbers. When biblical writers speak of the ‘fear of the Lord’ this is what they mean: that God’s pure being is so far beyond human imagining that trying to look into it would be like trying to look into the sun.” – end quote

We need to go out in the darkness sometimes, if for no other reason, than to remind us of our frailty, to remind us that God is certainly love but God is also wild and uncontrollable, to remind us that we don’t have to have it all figured out, to remind us that it’s ok to step out into the uncertain, even if we do so with fear and trembling.

Now don’t get me wrong – if all we ever get is darkness, then that can be suffocating. God comes to us in the light too. In fact, many of us begin our journey with God in the light – some of us begin this journey with a child-like trust, almost like an unquestioned belief in Santa Claus. But for most of us, life eventually messes with the light, messes with the certainty. We experience a traumatic loss. Or we are told that this God that is supposed to love all doesn’t love people who are different in one way or another. Or we discover that our parents were not the perfect people we thought they were. Or we develop questions that a belief system based on certainty can no longer hold. And suddenly, things are not so clear. It’s in those times that I’m so grateful for the stories of people who meet God in darkness.

The fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, says, “Moses’ vision began with light at the burning bush. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.” We should not be surprised that as we climb higher and higher on our faith journey, that our view of God becomes cloudy, that our faith provides us with more questions than answers, and that following Jesus begins to seem a little scary. It simply means we are entering more deeply into the mystery of the Divine.

Over and over again, I hear both pressure at the expectation that we have life figured out, our jobs figured out, parenting figured out, our future figured out, and the frustration that most of us don’t. By the time we’re 19 years old, we’re supposed to have figured out what we’re going to do with life so we can declare a major in college. Then we have to get a career started and then find a significant other. At that point, we have to wait long enough to have kids so that they won’t mess up our career but not too long so that we won’t be too old. Then we raise

those kids under the weight of the same time table, expectations, and clarity of course so that if they are not playing soccer, doing ballet, and learning a musical instrument by the time they start kindergarten, they are doomed to a life where they can't keep up with their peers.

No wonder, so many of us are so exhausted.

But the truth is that in spite of the pressure we put on ourselves and that is placed on us by the culture around us, life is not that simple. There are ups and downs, highs and lows, moments of clarity and moments of confusion. There are mountain top moments and existential crises in the valley of the shadow of death. There is beauty and there is loss. And deep down, we know that trying to sort out our life and the lives of those around us according to some carefully orchestrated plan is as futile as trying to count the stars of the sky.

Deep down, we know that, but sometimes, we actually need to go outside in the dark and stare at the stars to remember that. Sometimes, we need to be reminded that God loves us but God is also beyond us... Sometimes, we need to learn to walk in the dark – to remember that we don't have to have it all figured out – about God, about church, about work, about family, about life.

On our very first date, Mary Page quoted to me Wendell Berry's poem, "To Know the Dark." I want to end my sermon by sharing that poem with you as a collective reminder that there is a beauty and a wisdom that can seep into our being in the times of darkness when we don't know the path ahead or where we might end up.

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.  
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

Amen.