

December 19, 2021 ~ The Fourth Sunday in Advent

“Treasure Hunting in the Dark”

A Sermon Based on Isaiah 45:1a, 3,5-7

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Painting by Lourry Legarde

Isaiah 45:1a, 3,5-7 ~ Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus ... ³I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ... ⁵I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.

Our holy scriptures begin with this description of the origins of the universe:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Gen. 1:1-5)

This theme continues in the book of Isaiah, written in the middle of the sixth century BCE, during the Babylonian exile when the Israelites were encouraged to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their city and temple. God says through the prophet Isaiah: “***I form light and create darkness...***” (Is. 45:7)

Note that there is no negative value given to darkness. God created both darkness and light. Indeed, darkness preceded the creation of light. Light is created out of darkness. Nowhere does it say here that light is good and darkness is bad. But somewhere, along the line, we began to see darkness in negative terms as something that we should be afraid of.

How do you all feel about darkness? Any of you ever afraid of the dark when you were children? Any of you still afraid of the dark? I used to be so afraid of the dark when I was a child, sharing a third storey bedroom with my sister Sarah in our home that actually was built during colonial times on Hillside Avenue in Arlington, Massachusetts, just a short bus ride away from the Harvard University campus where my father taught.

That long staircase leading up to the third floor, the cold drafts that would lead to doors shaking, wind and rain and snow and limbs from trees knocking against the thin window panes, the creaks in the old wooden floor.

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” I was serious when I prayed that at night because I usually went to sleep afraid. Lying in the dark with the door open and a night light on, there were monsters and villains lurking in every corner. Of course, it didn’t help that it also was during the time of the Boston Strangler, and so our doors were locked up at night against a legitimate threat I didn’t totally understand since my parents and neighbors would speak in hushed voices about it so not to alarm us.

Of course, no kid wants to be known by their peer group as being afraid of the dark. But when I was about nine, I confided my secret to my best friend Lisa Lamphier, who was one year older than I and, therefore, a wise woman whom I should trust. She told me there was nothing to be afraid of and she would prove it to me. I needed to get over my fear by confronting it head on. She said we needed to sneak out and she would show me the world at night. So we arranged to meet up at 3 AM in the middle of the night leading into Sunday morning. That evening I asked my mother if I could sleep down in the den on the first floor that had a door leading out to the back yard. Not suspecting anything, she said yes. Armed with flashlight in hand and Keds sneakers on my feet, but still with my pajamas on, I quietly crept out of my house at the appointed time. There Lisa was waiting for me in my back yard. Together we roamed through all the streets we normally played on. Down Hillside Avenue to the park, on side streets our friends lived on, to the school yard as I courageously confronted the darkness.

God, through the voice of the prophet Isaiah says, ***“I will give you the treasures of darkness.”*** And that night, so many years ago, I began to receive those treasures of darkness. I discovered that the same neighborhood was a very different place in darkness than it was in the busy, crowded light of day with cars not on the roads but parked in driveways, people sleeping quietly indoors. I could see the stars above, the dew beginning to settle on the ground which even glistened by the dim light given off by the very full moon, creatures scurrying when we approached their hiding places. I had entered into a magical, enchanted world, which I learned was not filled with the monsters I thought inhabited it but rather was a space held by God. A darkened world that allowed the night sky to light up in all its splendor, for me to feel a connection to the earth on which I walked, and the many creatures that inhabited it. Also for one of the first times I had a visceral sense of the divine and also that I was a spiritual being.

The God who created each and every one of us, and who loves us intimately and wants the very best for us, promises: ***“I will give you the treasures of darkness.”*** I’m not exactly sure when we lost an understanding of God having created both darkness and light as good, which is spelled out so clearly in the creation narratives and our passage today. But, unfortunately, theologians, including in the Bible, began to dichotomize darkness and light, seeing them as polar opposites, with darkness receiving the short end of the stick. Traditional Christianity began to equate the word “darkness” with sin, ignorance, evil. Darkness became something to be feared. Parents call out to their children at dusk, “Come in, it’s getting dark outside!” And then they turn on the lights and lock the door behind us.

In our society, the dark has been associated with danger, nightmares, shady drug deals, jail cells. Even in ordinary language we say, “That was a dark movie.” “He’s in a dark mood.” “I am in a dark space.” The German tv series out on Netflix called “Dark” is a sinister thriller. Some think people with dark skin are inferior to people with light skin, a belief that is sinful and outrageous. By contrast, God proclaims: ***“I form light and create darkness ... I will give you the treasures of darkness.”***

Both light and darkness are good, and we need both to be healthy. Scientists have said that the invention of the incandescent light bulb was a revolutionary moment that changed life on earth in so many ways for the better. But some of these changes were harmful. With the invention of artificial light, most people only sleep about eight hours at night, all of it in one stretch, and often with some lighting in the background. Did you know that before the Industrial Revolution people would spend as much as fourteen hours of every day without light and in the dark? But they would not sleep all these hours straight through. There were not one but two sleep periods, the first being called “the first sleep” or “dead sleep” that would go from the evening until the wee hours of the morning. Then there would be a few hour break, followed by what was known as the “second” sleep or “morning” sleep that lasted until early morning. This break between these two sleep cycles was called the “watch.”

An historian named A. Roger Ekrich wrote about this “watch” period that *“families rose to urinate, smoke tobacco, and even visit close neighbors. Many others made love, prayed, and ... reflected on their dreams, a significant source of solace and self-awareness.’ In the intimacy of the darkness, families and lovers could hold deep, rich, wandering conversations that had no place in the busy daytime. ... In this borderland [watch] between wake and sleep, our ancestors may have experienced a state of being different from any we know, or any we can know unless we refuse the intrusion of artificial light.”*¹

Now, with the advent of all this artificial light, we are lucky if we get eight hours in the dark to sleep. The essential time we spend dreaming has been greatly condensed. Katherine May, who writes about this in her book, *Wintering*, has said that *“There is not enough night left for us. We have lost our true instincts for darkness, its invitation to spend some time in the proximity of our dreams.”*²

¹ Cited in Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (NY: Riverhead, 2020), pp. 85-86.

² Katherine May, *Wintering*, p. 87.

This liminal space and longer dream time additionally allowed people to be more receptive to God, which may account for the many places in scripture where God communicated through dreams. For example, listen to this story where God communicated to someone in a dream, from Matthew 1:18-21:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; ¹⁹ and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; ²¹ she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

It was because an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream that the Christ Child was born!

Psalm 19:2 says ***“Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.”*** The prophet Isaiah prophecies for God, stating ***“I will give you the treasures of darkness”*** (45:3). When we look in the Bible we see that so many encounters that people have with God are at night.

- God invites Abraham to go outside and look at the nighttime sky and count the stars, telling him that his descendants will be as many as the stars he sees. Following this God enters into a covenant with the Hebrew people.
- Years later, God came to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, in the middle of the night, giving him a vision of angels climbing a ladder running from earth to heaven. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said ***“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it”*** (Gen 28:16). Later, Jacob wrestled with an angel all night long. Although he was left with a limp, this nighttime encounter resulted in him receiving a blessing, a new name and destiny.
- Jacob’s son Joseph had important dreams at night. While they initially enraged his brothers, it was his dreams that later made him Pharaoh’s right-hand man.
- Do you remember that the escape of the Hebrew peoples from the Egyptians (known as the Exodus) took place in the darkness of night? God parted the waters of the Red Sea at night.
- Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, much of it in complete darkness, “while he and the devil sorted out who works for whom.”³

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (NY: HarperCollins, 2014), pp. 45ff.

- Jesus met with Nicodemus at night.
- During this Advent season as we celebrate Christ's birth, we are aware of the many images of darkness. Surrounding Jesus' birth, we read that the angels appeared to the shepherds while they were watching their flocks. When does scripture say this happened? Luke 2:8 says: "***And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.***" And those fields around Bethlehem surely were very dark. Jesus was born in a darkened cave. And above that cave a special star shone in the darkness that led the wise men to the baby Jesus. They needed the darkness to be able to find their way to the Christ Child. For you know that the stars are always outside, but we can only see them in the dark.
- After Jesus' crucifixion, the Gospel of John tells us that "***While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance***" (Jn 20:1). Jesus was not resurrected, surrounded by Easter lilies in the radiant daylight, but rather he was resurrected from the darkness of a tomb.

In the dark, new life emerges. Right now, in this darkest time of the year, it can be hard to remember how important this dark time is. Yet under the earth, plants are busy replenishing their roots, knowing instinctively that they must surrender to this dark season. The bulb in the dark, damp ground will blossom in the spring into a yellow daffodil. The earth-bound caterpillar in the dark cocoon will spread its wings as a monarch butterfly. In the darkness of a womb, a baby grows. Yes, darkness is pregnant with possibilities.

While we might think that treasure hunting is best done in the light, those who have courageously struggled through what are known as "dark nights of the soul" will say that, while they never would have intentionally sought out those challenges or suffering, they were absolutely the most important experiences of their lives. It was only when the bottom had fallen out and they were at their wit's end that, in that metaphorical darkness, they suddenly saw the light of Jesus that guided them. It was in that darkness that they found meaning, purpose, wisdom. It was in the darkness that they found treasures and encountered God!

Our region is experiencing darkness. In the midst of an ongoing global pandemic when we thought things could not get worse, tornados swept through our area, flattening communities, taking lives, leaving thousands to rebuild, and plunging us all into darkness both metaphoric and literal. Here in our community, we were left in literal darkness for 2 ½ days, although some still have not had their electricity restored. In that darkness, I stood out in my front yard and, for the first time since I've lived here, was able to see the magnificence of the starry skies, normally rendered invisible by all the bright streetlights right outside our home. I thought of the shepherds in the fields in the darkness of the night outside Bethlehem as they joined the generations who had waited for the birth of the Christ child.

I thought back to the time before electricity when our ancestors would have those two sleep periods every night, interrupted by the “watch.” They knew how to cope without being able to turn on light bulbs, have electric powered heat and hot water, microwaves, internet access, tv and Netflix, and all the conveniences we presently enjoy and do not know how to live without.

Yet in that darkness and in the darkness our region will continue to experience for a long time to come, there have been so many glimpses of light. So many treasures have been found in the darkness. So many people reaching out to help in Mayfield that they are having to turn people away for the time being. People taking others in. People donating money. People putting aside the things that normally divide us from religion, to politics, to class, to race to come together to help. People being the body of Christ, showing that Christ indeed is the light of the world.

Alice Walker, in her book *We are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* says that “*When life descends into the pit I must become my own candle Willingly burning myself To light up the darkness Around me.*” We, as the actual Body of Christ around the world, daily are called to reenact the original story of creation in which light was created out of darkness, as we become our own candles. We are called to light up the world around us that presently is in darkness. We are called to bring the lights of the candles on our Advent wreath that symbolize Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love out into the world around us! And while you are at it, buy one of the candles we have here and put it in your window to shine a light on the problem of homelessness here in our community, which has gotten so much worse since the tornados hit.

The two theologically most profound songs, in my view, are “Jesus Loves Me” and “This Little Light of Mine, I’m going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine ...” We are called to “let it shine!” as we remember that Jesus told us: ***“You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*** (Mt 5:14-16)

The Advent candles representing hope, peace, joy, and love stand before us today as a sign that within each of us is the power to banish darkness. Within each of us is the light of Christ’s coming and that light shines through us to others. And so we hear, one more time, the cry of the prophet Isaiah, telling us to “arise, shine for your light has come.” The birth we await—the coming of the Christ child into our homes and hearts—this is the light that will banish our darkness.

During this season, as you experience outer darkness with the shortening of days or the inner kind of darkness that the holiday season also can bring that for many can lead to melancholy and sadness, remember that there are treasures of divine love to be found and there are treasures that you too are called to bring into the darkness. Just around the corner, this Tuesday, December 21st, we will experience the longest, darkest night of the year on the Winter Solstice. I encourage you all to come that evening at 7 PM for our “Longest Night – Service of Light,” as we sit in a darkened sanctuary, candles in the windows as the lights from outside will stream through the darkened stained-glass windows. Together we will continue to watch and wait for the birth of the Christ Child. And in that darkness, we will discover how much light there truly is! And we will understand anew what the prophet Isaiah meant when he said: ***3I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.***

Let us pray ...