

SERMON

Waiting in Darkness

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see,” says the poet Theodore Roethke.

For eight more days, the darkness in our physical world will increase. What will you do with the darkness? Will you rush to fill the darkness with light? Or will you begin to see? And if so, what will you see? This morning, we invite you to consider that there is value in learning to wait in darkness.

David Bumbaugh tells us our ancestors “watched the night sky, the weakening sun and lengthening night, not because they feared the sun would lose its way, would fail to return; but because they knew that only when the darkness was complete could the new sun be born.”

It’s not easy to wait in darkness, whether physical or metaphorical. Virtually all of us are afraid of the dark as children, although what we really fear most are the things that we imagine are in the dark.

Overcoming that fear is the reason that rites- of- passage for young people becoming adults often involve spending a night alone in the dark. The Order of the Arrow ceremony of the Boy Scouts of America is such a ceremony. In order to be accepted into the Order of the Arrow, young people must go out into the wilderness to pass the night alone in silence ,with minimal food. It’s a way of forcing the overcoming of fears, fear of being alone, fear of hunger, fear of darkness. What are the rewards of such an ordeal? A greater sense of our own strength and resilience, greater mastery of our thoughts, our senses, and our environment, greater freedom to move through the world, in confidence, rather than fear.

I recall a major evening thunderstorm a year or so ago. It was in the summer, and we lost power. Within twenty minutes, my landlord was on the porch, reassuring us that he had a generator running and we were welcome to join him and his family in their lighted living room. I declined. First of all, I hate the noise of generators. But I was also in a meditative mood that night, and decided that rather than rushing to find light, I would try sitting in the darkness. Just sitting, to see what I could learn, to learn what I could see. I went out to the porch to watch the night sky. With no street lights, I began to see the shapes of things I would never notice in light: the shapes of trees and shrubs, the ribbon of alley between the

houses. I began to hear sounds of which I'm usually unaware -- of birds, of rabbits and squirrels, of the wind in the trees, the rain on the tin roof of the porch.

My colleague John Marsh has written this meditation on darkness. John says,

If you are going to meditate by candle light,

Do not hurry to light the candle.

The glow may concentrate your energies, but it will

Cost you

The contours of the room.

If you walk the night forest by flashlight,

The electric beam may reveal details on your path,

But you will lose everything

Outside your concentrated ray.

All that your light does not expose will become alien.

The sounds of animals will frighten you.

Shut off the beam, and you will travel the night forest

As one who belongs. . . .

If you are going to meditate by candlelight,

Do not hurry to light the candle.

(From, *With or Without Candlelight, A Meditation Anthology*, edited by Victoria Safford, pages 1-2)

For "in a dark time, the eye begins to see."

Darkness is to light as silence is to sound. There is much more darkness in the universe than light, much more silence than sound. Light and sound are the exception. Yet, we need both. Without silence, we would not know sound. Without darkness we would not know light.

St. John of the Cross said, “If a person wishes to be sure of the road they tread upon, they must close their eyes and walk in the dark.” Not many of us willingly do so. John is encouraging us to exercise our souls, move them toward what we might call greater existential trust. This may be the most basic spiritual issue we face. I think it’s what Alfred North Whitehead meant when he said, “Religion is what we do with our solitude.” It’s the question: “Do you know you are and will be okay, at peace, in spite of all the bad things that happen in the universe? Do you know that you could lose everything, business, career, health, spouse, loved ones, and eventually your life, and know that you will grieve but that ultimately you will be okay? Can you wait until the darkness is complete, knowing that only when it is complete can the light be reborn?”

Building that trust is a lifelong process. It never gets completed until we face the darkness, until we begin to see that we are more than our physical bodies, that we are part of something larger, part of all that is. Some call it faith. My faith is not that I will be protected from death, but that I am and will be okay in spite of death, in spite of suffering.

Roethke ends his poem with an affirmation of that sort. He says,

“A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.

The mind enters itself, and God the mind,

And one is One, free in the tearing wind.”

It’s an “in spite of” theology, an “in spite of” affirmation.

In some ways, our Western religions are much more insistent on the light. Sometimes it feels to me as if there is a desperateness in them, an insistence on the presence of light. The Hanukkah story comes out of a situation of war. With children we emphasize the warmth and light, the warmth and miracle of the story, but the back-story is about killing the oppressor, winning a war and restoring the temple to proper Jewish worship after it had been desecrated by the Syrians. A sense of desperation is understandable. The Maccabees waited in the darkness, wondering whether the oil in the cruse would be sufficient for the eight nights.

They only had enough oil for one. Surely if their god was pleased they would be able to kindle the Hanukkah lamps for eight nights, as he had commanded. It was sufficient. There was enough.

Christianity speaks of Jesus as the light of the world. The Gospel of John reassures us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” For John, God is “the true light which enlightens everyone,” and it came into the world in the form of Jesus. We often speak of the battle between good and evil as a battle between the forces of light and darkness. Zoroastrianism, one of the precursors of Christianity, used light, an eternal flame, as their symbol of Ahura Mazda, god of all. Mithraism, popular in Rome in the first century AD, was identified with the the Greek god of the sun, Helios. Eventually, Mithra was named Deus Sol invictus, unconquered sun god, unconquered because the sun always returned.

In contrast, when we look to the East, we see more of a balance between darkness and light. This is true especially in the yin/yang symbol, where the polarities of light and dark are complementary. Light and dark are equal in that symbol, and each contains the seed of the other. There is not a sharp line drawn between the two, as though they were in battle. Instead, they flow into each other, and both are surrounded by the circle, contained in the whole.

In the West, however, as in nature, light comes out of darkness. The miracle of Hannukkah comes in the midst of darkness. Jesus is born in the lonely midnight, in a stable, reminiscent of a cave. At the end of his life, he spends three days in the tomb, in darkness. The resurrection cannot come until after death. As one of my colleagues says, “The way to Easter is through Good Friday.”

Light cannot come until the darkness is complete.

Sometimes I wait with people in hospital settings, waiting for the treatment to be complete or for the doctor to bring news. That unknowing can feel like a kind of darkness. The scientific quest can also require waiting in the darkness of unknowing, waiting for the experiment to finish. It is important for the experimenter to wait for the results, lest his impatience skew or contaminate the results.

There can be joy in waiting in the darkness of unknowing. One of the primordial questions asked by both scientists and philosophers is: “Why is there something, rather than nothing?” Physicists tell us the vast majority of the universe

is empty and dark. Why is it there anything at all? Though it seems like an unanswerable question, we can still delight in living and loving the question. Karen Armstrong, wrote, “Human beings seem framed to pose problems for themselves that they cannot solve, pit themselves against the dark world of uncreated reality, and find that living with such unknowing is a source of astonishment and delight.” (*The Case for God*, page 311)

But sometimes unknowing is frustrating, especially when we are unhappy in our lives, unable to see a way forward. My colleague, John Morgan, writes of this kind of “waiting in darkness.”

There must be some mistake:

The road was here. At least

Five years ago I thought

The road I sought was here.

But, straight ahead, as far as eye can see

There is no road,

And I must wait.

When I look back over my life, to its major turning points, it seems to me that when I could not see the way forward, when I felt like I was in darkness, depressed, hating my job or feeling trapped in a relationship, eventually, something shifted and the way forward, previously obscured, suddenly seemed clear. I use the metaphor of a screen for this. Sometimes I ask myself what I should do, and I can't tell. The screen, my inner vision, is blank. I have no images, no pictures, no imagination of myself engaged in new activities or relationships. I say, “The screen is dark.” But something causes things to shift, perhaps the darkness is now complete. Suddenly I have a new vision. The screen is no longer “dark” but full of light and color and movement, and I know the way forward. I can now see myself in the new situation or relationship or job.

Our spiritual lives are like this too. There are times when we are sure we've “seen the light.” We know what we believe, about God, about life after death, about good and evil, about our purpose and calling. And then there are those dark times of unknowing, perhaps even times of anger and frustration, or times of

aimlessness, when life seems without meaning or purpose. John of the Cross called them “dark nights of the soul.”

William Bridges describes these times in our lives as liminal, undefined, suspended between different states of being. He uses the myth of Demeter and Persephone to illustrate that sometimes life goes “underground,” when there is winter in our souls as well as the world out there. Everything in nature has its periods of dormancy, of lying fallow. During these times we cannot tell what is going on underground. But as Thoreau said, it is in the night that the corn grows. And so do we.

May we know that these coming days of darkness will bring their own gifts. May we wait peacefully, trusting that when darkness is complete, the light will return.

Rev. Linda Hoddy

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Words for Prayer/Meditation

O thou who has called us out of the darkness into the marvelous light of life and love, help us to find our way through the noise and turmoil of the days ahead to the true meaning of Hanukkah [Christmas], to its quiet joys and to its peace.

Teach us that we cannot hear the songs of Christmas until our own hearts learn to sing them, and that the most important gifts which we can give to one another cannot be wrapped and put under the Christmas tree.

Show us, whose needs are so great, how close we are to what we seek,

And how often the things we want most desperately are ours already, if we will only stretch out our hands.

Help us to be brave enough for life and love, and guide us in our search through doubt and darkness until we find the faith which knows no place or season – until we learn at last that though the very stars may wander, there is that within us which need never lose its way.

A. Powell Davies

BENEDICTION

As we dwell in these days of darkness,
May the darkness “nurture our dreams,”
Give us new sight,
And bring rest and balance to our lives.
Go in peace. Amen