

Natalie W. Bell
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 Fourth Sunday Advent

Good News in the Darkness
Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[b] praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^[c] ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This year I was struck by the fact that the arrival of the angels with the Good News—***happened at night***.

In the darkness came the ***angels***, and the ***glory***, and the ***Good News of great joy*** for all people.

The Good News came at night.
That ***is not an accident.***

I've been reading a magnificent and unsettling book
by one of my favorite authors—Barbara Brown Taylor.
She is a former Episcopalian priest, turned professor and author, in Georgia.
The book is called "***Learning to Walk in the Dark***",
and its title tells you the subject.
She spent months researching darkness, and what we can learn from it.

She did some ***fascinating things***—
like exploring dark 'wild' caves in West Virginia,
attending meals where everyone was blindfolded,
or museums where blind guides led blindfolded tourists!
All this to learn about the power of darkness!

Why?
Because we kind of default to thinking about light and dark one way---
light is good, and dark is bad.
Think about that for a minute—don't you often think that way?
We ***prefer light.***

I find it bizarre that my husband prefers ***a small lamp*** in his home office.
I walk in and immediately turn on the overhead light.
My eyesight is worse than his,
So I like a flashlight everywhere in the house, so I can see

But darkness is about more than not seeing.
It's about ***fear*** as well.
Many people are afraid of the dark,
and most of us are unsure of it.
Nyctophobia is the technical term for fear of night.
We tend to ***panic*** when everything goes dark,
when the power is out, and lights are nowhere to be found.
We associate ***darkness with things like crime***, and ghosts, and fear,
and anything we don't understand

We have essentially ***loaded the idea of darkness*** with all kinds of
meaning...but nowhere in scripture does it say that

ALL darkness is bad, and ALL light is good!

The Bible does say things like 1 John 1:15:
God is light, and in Him there is no darkness.
 The Gospel of John chapter 1 speaks about
 Jesus coming into the world *as a light in the darkness.*
 But the Bible also has amazing things in darkness –
 all ***creation comes out of darkness,***
 and many ***revelations from God*** happen at night!

We start our worship services by ***welcoming the light of Christ.***
 But ***how*** do we do that?
 We do it by ***lowering the lights*** before the acolyte brings in the flame for the
 candles on the Lord's table!

It's ***not really the same*** to see the light of Christ, or ponder it's meaning,
 unless it's dim or dark.
 It's so much more ***meaningful,***
 when the light of Christ comes into our darkness, isn't it?

Taylor says that our ***lives do not always fit neatly***
 into categories of light and dark.
 Gee, that might be an understatement.
 We want to see some things as ***light, and good.***
 And other things as ***dark, or bad.***

What if darkness and light are ***not opposites?***
 What if they are like ***doubt and faith—***
 what if they ***can and should exist together?*** In all of us!

What if we ***need the dark?***
To actually find God!

Taylor talks about the dangers of ***'full solar spirituality'*** for Christians,
 where we assume that God's job is to bring us light.
 We ***want everything sunny,*** full of light.
 If it's not, that it's wrong, evil, sinful....and maybe we don't have enough faith!
 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 2012, pg. 9

We've all heard this kind of thinking.
It **assumes that God wants** us to have a good sunny life-always.

But Jesus said he came to bring **abundant life** (John 10),
And what if there's something **we learn from Jesus—in the dark?**

What is there is something truly awesome,
that we can only learn in what Taylor calls '**lunar spirituality**',
a **faith that exists in the dark?**

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 2012, pg. 9-10

This is probably why I love **Streams in the Desert** so much,
because it often speaks of dark nights of the soul that we encounter as
Christians—not because we are bad, or have too little faith—
but because **we are seeking God**, and seeking to live **faithful lives**—
which includes **walking through the darkness with God**.

Christian **mystics** throughout the ages wrote of the power of darkness.
St. John of the Cross, a Carmelite monk in the 16th century?
wrote about finding God in the dark, as he sat in a lonely prison cell.
Paul too wrote from a dark prison cell,
some of the most beautiful letters in the New Testament!

So what if **darkness is not dark to God?**
And not always bad for us?

In fact, if we look to our Biblical ancestors,
we find story after story of people **finding God at night—in the dark**.
The promise God gave to **Abraham** was given to him at night,
when he was told he would have as many descendants as the stars.
Jacob wrestled with God overnight, and received his new name, Israel.
The **Exodus from Egypt** happened overnight, after the firstborn sons were
killed in their sleep, but God's people were unharmed.
Manna descended to the Israelites overnight as they wandered through the
wilderness.

And all this doesn't even mention the power of **dreams**—
dreams and visions that happened in the night!

Joseph dreamed about his future and his brothers, at night...and then walked through a night all his own when he was sold into slavery by those brothers, and later imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. (Gen 37)

Jacob dreamed of a ladder to heaven—at night (Gen 28).

Samuel heard the voice of God calling to him—in the night (1 Samuel 3).

Daniel had visions and dreams in his captivity—at night (Daniel 7).

Peter saw the vision of clean and unclean things together—in a dream, at night (Acts 10).

Which brings us the **birth of Jesus**.

Throughout the prophets,
the Messiah is one who is a **light, who comes where? Into darkness!**

And Jesus did in fact **come at night!**

Do you remember that Jesus entered and left this world—in the dark?

He was born at night in **Bethlehem**,

likely in a cave or an underground room, because that was the common place for animals in a home.

He left this world, breathing his last on the **cross**
and darkness covered the land.

At night his body was laid in a tomb.

And it was **dark on Easter morning** when Mary came looking for him—
When she found the stone had been rolled away.

There's a theme here---**What if all new life begins in the dark?**

We tend to **complain** about darkness, especially as we walk through it,
but what if **it can bring goodness** as well?

What if darkness can give **birth to light?**

What if darkness **is part of life, and goodness?**

Have you ever been blindfolded for a game?

If you **pretend to be blind** for a day,

you quickly learn that losing sight

means gaining a **heightened awareness of all your other senses**.

And being blind is much more **intimate** than the world of those with sight.

Blind people **touch faces**, they touch objects,

they smell the world around them, they listen to the smallest sounds.

They *can 'see' things if you will,*
because of their sounds, texture, weight, and shape.
 They can hear what different *trees* sound like,
 Feel what a *face* looks like.

When you think about it, *humans need some darkness.*
To understand the world.
 People kept in constant light tend to go *crazy*.

The *circadian rhythm* of our bodies,
 that internal clock that helps us keep our days and nights straight—
 it requires that we spend some time *sleeping—in the dark.*
 It's why you hear how important it is to *turn off the TV,*
 and the *cellphone* at night.
 We *sleep better* without light.

So, what if the *darkness is not all bad?*
 What if there are *awesome things* that happen, only at night?
 What if there are things to be learned, to be experienced,
 that can *only happen in darkness?*

This makes sense.
 Think about the *night sky.*
 You can only see the *brilliant twinkling stars* when it's dark—
 and only when all the artificial light of our homes and cars and cities is far
 away.
 To fully appreciate the beauty of the *moon,*
 You'll want the blackest night, right?

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk,*
 one of my favorite poets, Annie Dillard says;
"You do not have to sit outside in the dark.
If, however, you want to look at the stars,
you will find that darkness is necessary.
But the stars neither require nor demand it."

We *don't have to learn the lessons* that can only be learned in darkness.

We can insist on wanting only light.
 But what if we ***decided to walk through the darkness in life—with Jesus?***
 To learn what God has to teach us?
 To find our Savior, who came as a light—in darkness?

This beautiful story of the ***Savior's birth***—
 it takes place in a ***dark place, a dark hour, and a dark time.***
 Mary and Joseph have not been having the time of their lives.
 She is a young unwed pregnant girl,
 he is a man who is marrying a pregnant bride.

They have had to ***leave their hometown*** and travel for days to get to
 Bethlehem...only to find there are no homes with upper rooms
 where they can stay, sleep, and she can give birth!
 Only the lower room, an ***underground cave type room***—
 where the animals stay.

Talk about walking through a ***dark valley,***
 can you even imagine if you were asked
 to walk on foot for many miles, leaving your home and family,
 only to arrive with no place to stay,
 no place to lay your newborn child?
 This was supposed to be ***a time for the family to rejoice,***
 for women to smile swap stories about labor,
 for men to congratulate one another on a new life.

Instead God ***uses the night, the darkness***—to enter this world.
 And did you notice that the angels announcing the good news—
 that they came to the ***shepherds,***
 who were tending their flocks, ***by night!***
 The ***Good News*** arrived in a dark sky,
 and the sound of ***angels pierced a dark, silent night!***

What if we ***need the dark, as much as we need the light?***
 What if we ***need the darkness to learn how to see in the light?***
 What if ***Jesus came,*** not only as a light, but also to ***show us the miracles that
 came happen in the dark?***

John 9 is a story of a man born blind, and an interesting tale because it's not just about a blind man whose sight is restored. It's about who is **really blind** in the story—and it has very little to do with **eyesight**.

In John 9:38-39, Jesus said, *"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see **may become blind**."*

Did you hear what Jesus said?

He said he came to that people who are blind may see, and **those who do see become blind**.

What? Why? Is this because we learn things in the dark?

Sounds a little like *those who want to save their life must lose it, and those who lose their lives will save them (Mark 8:35)*

The first will become last, and the last will become first (Matt 20:16).

Maybe we need some darkness.

Do you know that the **date of Easter**, the celebration of Jesus' **resurrection**, is determined by the cycles of the **moon**?

Easter is the **full moon** on or after the spring equinox on March 21st.

This is why it's a different date every year, and never the same two years in a row.

Miracles happen at night.

Joy breaks into our lives, even at night.

Especially at night.

It is at night that we truly **understand the meaning of God's light in Jesus!**

That first silent night---sets a pattern for us as we welcome the Savior Jesus.

Christmas may seem like bright lights and loud sounds in our world,

But actually it happened on **a dark, silent night**.

I love this message I read this week by Alicia Bruxvoort:

*The message the angels proclaimed on that Bethlehem hillside long ago didn't just change the course of **one bygone silent night**.*

*The good news of great joy changed the course of **every silent night to come**.*

Because we don't have a God who merely pierces our darkness.

*We have a **Savior who lingers beside us on our long silent nights***

(Isaiah 9:2-7). The prophets foretold it (Isaiah 7:14). The angel repeated it.

*And His name confirms it (Matthew 1:23). **God is with us.***

“How to Find Hope on a Long Silent Night”, Proverbs 31 Ministries, December 21, by Alicia Bruxvoort.

I don't know about you,
But thinking of the ***miracles that happen in darkness*** helps me,
especially at Christmas.
Christmas for so many people,
maybe even for most adults, it can be a time of ***darkness*** as well.

We may see the ***lights on trees and houses***,
but in our hearts and homes we can be ***overwhelmed with darkness***.
Our lives, our families, and our world
do not reflect a Hallmark card (or movie) at Christmas.
Not every story in our lives has a happy ending.

But one day—ALL stories will.
One day Jesus will come again, and make all things bright.
Until then, we walk with Him through the night.

At Christmas, ***we need Jesus***,
The ***light shining into our darkness***.
Some might even say that we can truly ***see*** Him,
And truly ***love*** Him,
because he comes into our darkness.

That is the ***Good News of Christmas***.
Good News that I sure need, and I imagine you do too.
Merry Christmas my friends,
And for that, all God's people said, Amen.