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 First Sunday of Advent

***You Can't See the Light Unless It's Dark***  
***John 1:1-9***

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*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life,<sup>[a]</sup> and the **life was the light** of all people. <sup>5</sup> The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The **true light**, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.<sup>[b]</sup>*

***Darkness.***

The very word can evoke negative images and feelings, right?

Have any of you ever been ***afraid of the dark***, maybe as a kid? Maybe now? There's a word for that.

***Nyctophobia, fear of the dark.***

The word comes from the ***Greek Goddess Nyx***, the daughter of Chaos, who gave birth to children named *Sleep, Death, Tribe of Dreams, Strife, and Doom*. Cheerful family, huh?

Nyx would ride across the sky in a chariot driven by black horses and pull the curtain of night behind her.

Later she had two more children with a different god, named Light and Day. So in Greek mythology, ***darkness comes before light.***

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Harper Collins: New York, 2014, pg. 63.

***Just like it does in the Bible.***

Genesis 1:1-3 says:

*In the beginning when God created<sup>[a]</sup> the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup> the earth was a formless void and **darkness** covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God<sup>[b]</sup> swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup> Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.*

***Darkness can seem bad.***

It's the stuff of ghosts and goblins, scary dreams, and monsters under the bed!

Darkness in the Bible is often associated with something that needs light—like in creation, or our passage from John 1.

*Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Darkness in creation is a **void**.

Darkness is a **power that cannot snuff out the light of Christ**.

Many times in the Bible darkness is thought of as a **negative opposite to light**.

For example, Psalm 27:1 says this:

***The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?***

The image is that God is light and darkness brings fear.

We use this language of **DICHOTOMY between light and dark** in our lives today—we might talk about walking through dark times, or a darkness in someone's heart, or being afraid of the dark.

But what if, **darkness has gotten a BAD RAP?**

Darkness is **not just a negative opposite** to light.

It is not just the image of something bad, or evil, or not good.

Darkness is the **circumstance NEEDED to see light**.

Darkness is **necessary** for light to mean anything at all.

**Poet Annie Dillard** famously said in her book *“Teaching a Stone to Talk”*:

*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.*

So true.

Stars don't mean much when the sun is shining, do they?

They are only visible, only beautiful, in a dark night sky.

So darkness is the necessary ingredient for those lights to be meaningful.

***What if the same thing is true of God?***

What if we can experience God in meaningful and powerful ways,  
***while traveling through the darkness of life?***

What would that ***mean for us right now***, in the middle of this pandemic,  
in the middle of so much political upheaval and societal change?  
If we describe our current times as ***darkness***,  
What if that's somehow ***good news?***

What if the ***darkness***, like the mess we're walking through right now, is the  
***perfect time to SEE God?***  
To experience ***God's presence?***

***We would certainly not be alone in this.***

The Bible is literally full of ***epiphanies***---at night. In the dark.  
Revelations of God's ***presence***, God's ***love***, God's ***covenant***—in the dark.

***God took Abram*** out under the night sky in Genesis 15:5  
*And said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."*  
Multiple times God reminded Abraham of this nighttime covenant to have his own children, even though he and Sarah were past that age.  
God kept reminding him that his heirs would be as numerous as the stars.

***Abraham's grandson Jacob*** had a similar revelation from God in the dark.  
He fell asleep outside and had a dream of a ladder reaching to heaven in Genesis 28:13-15. God says to him after the dream:  
*"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; <sup>14</sup> and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,....<sup>15</sup> Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,...."*

***Jacob's son Joseph*** had a dream that foretold his future leadership over his brothers in Egypt.

***Darkness was meaningful in the life of Moses too***,  
for the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea happened in the dark—  
can you imagine seeing that?

And then **God's very presence**, is revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, from a **dark cloud** in the sky in Genesis 19, just before the Lord gives the 10 commandments.

**Manna** even arrives for the people to eat, overnight, in the dark.

**Apparently, there is a lot to be LEARNED in the dark!**

Psalm 19 says so: *day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.*

**The New Testament is also full of references to darkness.**

There are plenty of references to it as something negative—

Like when Paul speaks of *this present darkness*, meaning the bad spiritual powers and rulers of this world, in Ephesians 6:12.

**But darkness is also REDEMPTIVE.**

The baby **Jesus was born** at night, and the **angels** announced his presence to the shepherds in the night sky. The **wise men** followed a star to him!

As **Jesus died** on the cross for our sins, darkness covered the whole land.

And his **resurrection** happened at night,

for Mary arrived at the empty tomb **while it was still dark** in John 20.

**New life literally began for all of us—in the dark!**

We all **know intuitively** that we **NEED** some darkness.

We need it for good sleep.

We need day and night for our circadian rhythm, to keep us healthy.

Darkness is **necessary and good** for the human **body, and soul.**

But all too often we assign **only negative connotations** to darkness.

People talk about being in a dark place, and

Christians sometimes suggest that having dark feelings

is bad—it's about being at fault, or not having enough faith!

**Nothing could be further from the truth.**

Early church mystics like St. John of the Cross,

talked about meeting God in the poem, "*The Dark Night of the Soul*",

That phrase is now a term used to describe

a **transformation that happens through suffering.**

*In Saint John of the Cross' poem the darkness represents the **hardships and difficulties** the soul meets in detachment from the world ... the painful experience that people endure as they seek to **grow in spiritual maturity and union** with God.*  
<https://www.ramdass.org/st-john-of-the-cross-and-dark-night-of-the-soul/>

***What if that's us?***

As we grow in faith—during difficult times?

What if we **CAN AND SHOULD expect to see God**, to experience God's **presence**,  
**While walking through the darkness!**

Wouldn't that be **great news for this Advent season in 2020?**

Advent is all about waiting for Christ and preparing our hearts.  
 But this Advent seems pretty dark.

I don't know a single person who isn't **weary right now**.  
 Everyone I know would agree that this Christmas, things are harder.  
 We are separated from loved ones,  
 grieving the loss of those who have passed,  
 Wondering when and if life will ever return to normal.

Which is strange because it's **Christmastime**,  
 and we are literally are **surrounded by lights**.  
 Lights everywhere at Christmas.

So, as Christians we can be **tempted to focus solely on the light**.  
 Sometimes Christians feel like they always need to see the positive,  
 Or count the blessings, you know?  
 We say, *well, things are not so good, but....i've got so much to be thankful for.*

Sometimes we feel like as people of faith,  
 We are **supposed to see the sunny side** of life, and the bright side of everything.  
 After all, it's Christmas, the season to celebrate the light of Christ!

But do you notice what we do when we welcome the light of Christ each week?  
**We DIM THE LIGHTS—so we can see the flame shining brightly.**

There's something really **POWERFUL** about that.

God is not just present in the light—***God is in the darkness too.***  
Sometimes ***especially*** in the darkness.

I love pastor Barbara Brown Taylor's book ***Learning to Walk in the Dark***,  
because it suggests that we need that skill.

We need to know how to walk through the dark times of life,

***Looking*** for God.

***Expecting to find*** God!

We should ***learn to walk in the darkness***,

so that we are ***attuned to seeing God's presence*** in the dark,  
much like we see the stars at night!

***So what about YOU?***

What resonates with you in all this talk of darkness?

Is dark always a negative for you?

Can you imagine God's presence, and power and love—in the dark?

This year we are going to do an Advent Sunday School called ***A Weary World:  
Reflections for a Blue Christmas***, based on the book by Kathy Escobar.

(And no, this is not about the Elvis' song).

It's about getting real—

being honest about our current reality and how we are dealing,  
or not dealing with that, this Christmas.

***So, what is YOUR reality this Advent?***

Where are you hurting?

What are you longing for?

We all have pain that is ***so much sharper*** this year---

so what if we asked to ***see God's presence and power*** in that darkness,  
not in spite of it, but right in the ***middle*** of it?

Couldn't we ask God for that?

When this church was shut down in April at Easter,  
we took ***Easter baskets*** to all the kids and youth.

And inside with lots of treats, were some flower seeds.

One family decided to just throw them into their flower beds,

Never realizing that those little flowers would pop up, beautifully, just about the time we had to close the church again this fall.

It was a **God-sighting**, a visible **sign of God's presence** in this strange time of church online, and church connections made in different ways.

That mom said: *It was a great reminder that although we **might not be together in body**, that the **body of Christ still flourishes like our determined little poppies**.*

Isn't that so true?

It's a strange year, a hard year, a difficult Christmas,

There is **plenty of darkness**,

But there are also so many **opportunities to see God's light!**

Do you remember the Christmas carol "**Oh Holy Night**"?

The first line sums it up perfectly.

Remember how it starts?

**Oh holy night, the stars are brightly shining.**

Friends, that is **our Good News** of the Gospel.

It may **feel like night**, but that's when we see the stars most brightly.

It may be **dark**, but that's when **God shows up in amazing ways**.

May we all have the **eyes to see God's presence**,

and may all God's people say, Amen.