

## **“Learning to Walk in the Dark”**

December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1: 1- 6

### **The Proclamation of John the Baptist**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

“During Advent, when darkness envelopes the earth, we celebrate the coming light and affirm that within the womb of darkness, light emerges, and growth occurs, usually when we least expect it.”

So today in the midst of everything that is casting shadows, the darkness is not the problem, but it is only that we do not know how to walk in it.

At first, when it starts getting dark, you feel lost, like walking in the woods on a moonless night. Then you discover little lights in the dark woods – a star on the horizon. As your eyes adjust to the dark, and there are glimmers of something in the distance. It’s always in the darkness, we discover light – enough to find our way home.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars” -

I have never been a good sleeper anyway. Especially, since my shoulder surgery, sleeping has not been restful to say the least. I wake up in the middle of the night – my arm throbbing either with real pain or the

anticipation of pain. I cannot go back to sleep. Shadows loom large and threatening. My worries and imagination take over.

When I have enough, I wake up Chuck, my husband from his deep sleep, just to sit with me until I can go back to sleep. I also found that Tylenol PM helps.

When he leaves to go back to St. Paul, I have already planned to add more night lights and candles around the house. They don't always take away the loneliness or the need for a reassuring touch. But they do help orient myself and find a way – in the dark.

Darkness has a light of its own, and isn't always negative.

For instance – in dark soil, seeds germinate and push toward the light. In the darkness of the womb, a baby grows, and on the darkest night, the eye begins to see.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes her early darkness – she says – since I was a just child – and had not done therapy yet – I did not know that the real darkness was inside of me not on the outside or that I had any power over it. No one ever said – for me to talk back to the darkness.

The title of her book is Learning to Walk in the Darkness – because the truth is there are few people who can teach us about how to walk in the darkness.

And there is a lot of darkness these days. In April, David Brooks wrote a letter in the New York Times titled The Pandemic of Fear and Agony.

He asked his readers to tell him about their mental health – “how you are faring in this hard time? He writes: I don't know what I expected; maybe some jaunty stories about families pulling together in a crisis.

What you sent gutted me.

There have been over 5,000 replies so far, and while many people are hanging in there, there is also a river of woe running through the world — a significant portion of our friends and neighbors are in agony. And trying to figure out how to walk in the darkness. Here are some responses:

- 1) A college student in State College, Pennsylvania., wrote that at first the lockdown seemed like a lark – a chance to get out of certain obligations. But “now almost a month into staying here, I've been gripped by a deep depression. My appetite is very low. I'm sleeping far too much to feel as lethargic as I do.
- 2) “My future, which seemed so bright a few months ago as I anticipated graduating in May, now seems bleak and hopeless: How will I find a job

with the economy tanking? How will I pay hundreds of dollars per month when my loan bills kick in during August?"

3) Senior citizens are especially hard hit, particularly the widows and widowers. For many, it's the painful sense of missing their grandkids, the precarity of living with a disease that could kill them at any time. For others, it's the wrenching loneliness.

4) Some people are active for days, frantically cleaning the house, and then one day they just shut down and cry. A person from Denver is worn down by being so suspicious of others and asked, "Why am I suddenly afraid of the mail carrier or the food delivery?" Too much darkness these days.

I went to bed last night – not sure what I would say to you today. Except – this – to survive all of this: "We must learn to walk in the Dark".

Since I am also learning to walk in the darkness – I really can't give you any worthwhile lessons – but I have quotes that guide me. Listen and see if they might help you to walk in the darkness of Advent.

*"I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light."*

*"...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."*

– Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark

*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*

*When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator. And my life is my message.*

– Mahatma Gandhi

*Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.*

– Helen Keller, blind and deaf author.

*"Often people ask how I manage to be happy despite having no arms and no legs. The quick answer is that I have a choice. I can be angry about not having limbs, or I can be thankful that I have a purpose. I chose gratitude."*

– Nick Vujicic

*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."*

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier."*

– Mother Theresa

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference."*

– Robert Frost, poet

*"There is a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there."*

– Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark

And then John the Baptist: – with his own instructions about how to walk in the darkness.

The good news of Jesus Christ – the Message! – begins here, following to the letter the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Watch closely: I'm sending my preacher ahead of you; He'll make the road smooth for you. Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism – a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit – will change you from the inside out."

John is surrounded by a crowd waiting to hear what he has to say about walking in the darkness.

I think, John the Baptist is bellowing how to live in the darkness. He says it is good news. One good thing is that we don't have to simply shrug our shoulders, sigh, and shake our heads at the headlines as if they describe the way the world will always be. The prophet is announcing a new era is about to begin. God is about to do a new thing. God intends to fulfill God's purposes for a new creation on earth.

Another reason this is good news is that when John the Baptist was asked, "What can we do in the meantime?" he had something concrete to recommend. There is something we can do. Being able to do something to make a difference has an amazing way lifting hope. Here are things folks are doing:

#### 1) Practice social solidarity

1. Social solidarity means thinking about our community, not just ourselves and personal security. It means staying at home, if you have the privilege to do so, to flatten the curve. It means not hoarding masks, sanitizers, and groceries.

2. Donate to local food banks

3. Writing a positive Yelp or Google review for a local business.

4. Don't forget about people who are incarcerated

5. Order online if you're able, and leave a generous tip when possible

6. My favorite is from someone who said: "Light always overcomes darkness" – I have turned my Christmas window candles back on. It's the smallest gesture imaginable, and it isn't on a par with sending a \$1,000 check or volunteering to test a vaccine. It isn't as important as supplying ventilators or intensive care unit beds. But at a time when I can't go out and hug my neighbors, it sends the message that, as real and scary as the virus situation is, we will get through it.

There are some things we can do in darkness. We do these things. It makes a difference.

It makes way for the light of God – who is far braver than you and I, who's Spirit can do far more than we can imagine. Christ is coming as our Savior.

Rough paths will be made smooth, obstacles overcome, crooked places straightened. Jesus Christ is coming, igniting us with his fire and Spirit.

Make way for him. Live into your highest hopes and deepest compassion.

Pave his way by bearing good fruit, doing what you can to love your neighbor.

At the end of his article, David Brooks offers a different kind of wisdom to live in the darkness: He says: “There’s a heroism in the vulnerability you display in these letters, a courageous willingness to share your fears.

You can see that spiritual growth pulses through the paragraphs. An atheist wrote that he prays daily, though he doesn’t know to whom.

Many people are reading Viktor Frankl. “I am looking at this as a type of monastic retreat. I am hoping that we come out of this crisis as a nation with a renewed sense of perspective, a new sense of our dependence on each other.”

Brooks says: I’m reminded that this is a time to practice aggressive friendship with each other – to be the one who seeks out the lonely and the troubled. It’s also true that character is formed in times like this. People see deeper into themselves, bravely learn what their pain is teaching them, and become wiser and softer as a result.

So much respect, David. That is some of how we walk in the darkness.

Barbara Brown Taylor ends her book with this prayer –

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.