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 Christmas Eve Late 2022

Good News in the Darkness
Luke 2:1-20

I am always struck by the fact that the
 angels arrived with the Good News—*at night*.
 It was in the darkness that the *angels came*,
 and announced the *Good News of great joy* for all people.
 And I think that *is not an accident*.

One of my favorite authors—Barbara Brown Taylor
 Has a great book called “*Learning to Walk in the Dark*”,
 and its title is 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 in only one way---
light is good, and dark is bad.
 Think about that for a minute—don’t you often think that way?
 We usually *prefer light*.

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.
 We tend to *panic* when everything goes dark,
 when the power is out, and lights are nowhere to be found.
 We associate *darkness with bad 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!

The Bible does say things like
God is light,
 And in the Gospel of John
 Jesus comes into the world *as a light in the darkness.*

But the Bible also says amazing things about the environment of darkness –
 Like, all *creation came out of darkness,*
 and many *revelations from God* happen at night!

Tonight we'll sing by candlelight
 and remember that it's *not the same* to see that light of Christ,
 or ponder it's meaning, unless you also have some darkness, right?
 Lights are much more powerful in the dark!

Taylor says that our *lives do not always fit neatly*
 into categories of light, as good, and dark, as bad.

But what if darkness and light are *not always 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 a '*full solar spirituality*' for Christians,
 when we assume that God's job is to make everything great and sunny!
 And if it's not sunny, it must be *wrong, evil, sinful....*

Or worse, maybe it's that 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 sunny perfect life!
 But with people having free will, and this world being broken,
 there is no perfect life, not yet.

Jesus did say that he came to bring *abundant life* (John 10).
 But, what if there's something *we learn from Jesus—in the darkness?*

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

My daily devotional "*Streams in the Desert*",
often speaks of the dark nights of the soul that we encounter
as Christians—NOT because we are bad, not because we lack faith—
but because this world is a mess, we are imperfect,
and life involves walking through darkness.
But the promise is, we do not walk through it alone.

Christian *mystics* throughout the ages wrote about 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!

What if God can be found, in the dark?

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 plague on firstborn sons,
but God's people were unharmed.
Manna descended to the Israelites overnight
as they wandered through the wilderness.

And then there is the power of *dreams and vision--*
that happen at night!

Joseph dreamt about his future and his brothers, at night...
and then walked through darkness when he was sold into slavery by those brothers,
and later imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. (Gen 37)
Jacob dreamt 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 to the *birth of Jesus*.

Jesus did in fact *come into the world, at night!*

Jesus *entered and left* this world—in the darkness!

He was born at night in *Bethlehem*,

likely in a cave or an underground room,

because that was the common place for animals.

And he left this world, breathing his last on the *cross* while 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—

And found that the stone had been rolled away.

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

We tend to *complain* about darkness, especially as we walk through it, but what if *we can find goodness while we are IN it?*

What if darkness can give *birth to light?*

Have you ever been blindfolded?

you quickly learn that losing sight

means gaining a *heightened awareness of 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 sound, texture, weight, and shape.

They can hear what different *trees* sound like,

Feel what a *face* looks like.

And when you think about it, we *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 bright light.

So, what if we can experience *awesome things*--
Only *in the dark*?
Think about the *night sky*.
You can only see the *brilliant twinkling stars* when it's dark—
And to fully appreciate the beauty of the *moon*,
You need a dark sky, 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."

Friends, what if we *decided tonight*,
to walk through the darkness of life—holding onto Jesus?
What if we decided to *learn* what God has to show us, in the darkness?

We spend so much time praying against all pain and darkness in life,
But what if we asked for the *gifts and wisdom* that we might receive *in it?*

This is not to say that all darkness is good, or that suffering is good,
But rather, *what if God can bring good, even out of darkness?*

Isn't that the story of our *Savior's birth*—
in a *dark place, at a dark hour, and a dark time*.
Mary and Joseph were not having the time of their lives.
She was a young unwed pregnant girl,
he a man marrying a pregnant bride.

They 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 could give birth!
Only the lower room, where the animals stay.

Talk about walking through a *dark valley*,
 can you even imagine if you were asked
 to walk for many miles, leaving your home and family,
 only to arrive with no place to stay,
 and no place to lay your newborn child?

This was supposed to be *a time for the family to rejoice*,
 for women to smile and swap stories about labor,
 for men to congratulate one another on a new child.

Instead the baby is born in a manger,
 And the angels announce the good news—
 To *shepherds*, tending their flocks, *by night!*

The *Good News pierced a dark, silent night!*

What if *Jesus came that way*,
to show us that MIRACLES can happen in the dark?

Have you ever witnessed a miracle?
 Don't they usually happen *in a dark time?* a hard time?
 But by the power of God, in that darkness we can find light!

I love this message 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 angels repeated it.
 And His name confirms it (Matthew 1:23). [Emmanuel] God is with us.*
 "How to Find Hope on a Long Silent Night", Proverbs 31 Ministries, December 21, by Alicia Bruxvoort.

Thinking about *miracles in darkness* helps me,
 especially at Christmas.
 Because Christmas for so many of us,
can be a time of *darkness*.

We see the *lights on trees and houses*,

but in our hearts and homes we also see *dark times*.
Our lives, our families, and our world
do not resemble a Hallmark card or movie.
Not every story in our lives has a happy ending.

But one day—ALL stories will end well.
One day Jesus will come again, *and make all things bright and right*.
Until then,
we can walk with Him through the night.
Hold onto Jesus, my friends.

He is the *light shining in OUR darkness*.
That is the *Good News tonight*.
And for that we can all say, Merry Christmas!
Amen.