

Sermon: Cloudy with a Chance of Divine Presence

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Scripture: Exodus 13:17-21; Luke 4:1-13

I remember it as well as any 40-year-old can remember a time 36 years ago. I was four years old, and my parents took our family to Florida. I remember riding in the car all the way to my great grandparents' house in the Orlando area in a caravan of sorts with my grandparents either in front of or behind us. It was an exciting trip and a long one. When we got to their house, we saw all kinds of Florida wildlife. I remember being especially taken with the lizards that found their way into the house. But it wasn't the lizards, or time with family, or the hot Florida sun that had me most excited.

What I was most excited about was going to Walt Disney World, where I would get to see the characters from my favorite movies live and in person. While there, we went on many rides, one of which was Snow White's castle. This ride, as I remember, took you underground and out of the bright Florida sunshine into the darkness that lurked beneath the surface. Most of the ride was fine and predictable: Snow White, fairest of them all. Bunch of dwarves, some of them grumpy. Hi-ho, hi-ho. Until we got to the part where the evil queen cackled and held a poison apple up to Snow White. There, in the darkness of that cavernous children's ride, I was terrified. The image of this horrible, evil witch of a woman harming the beautiful Snow did me in. I cried and screamed and couldn't wait to get off that ride. I believe I stayed very near to my parents for the rest of that day. I am told that I refused to go on any rides that went underground. No "It's a Small World" or "Pirates of the Caribbean" for me. If it was in the dark, I wasn't going anywhere near it.

To this day, I can't bring myself to watch *Snow White*. Sometimes in my nightmares, I imagine the cackling of the witch. My parents tell me that we went camping not long after that and I cried in the tent at night fretting over the witches. The witches. I think this was my first awareness that there might be something in the darkness that was frightening. For many years, I feared the dark. Looking back, I'm not so sure it was the darkness, itself, that I feared, so much as what I imagined was in that darkness that wasn't there in the light. Well into my teens, I distinctly remember turning out the lights in the basement of my parents' house and running as fast as I could up the stairs as though something were chasing me. To be honest, there are moments I still sometimes do that... just not as quickly as I used to.

So what is it about the dark that we so fear? What do we think is there that isn't there in the day? Witches? Lizards? Evil? And where did this fear come from? These are some of the questions explored in Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, on which our Lenten worship series is based. Over the next few weeks, we are going to spend some time thinking about the dark, what it signifies in our memories, culture, and spirituality. If you join us for our Lenten book study, you'll get to delve more into this topic, but how we think about darkness and light is such a fundamental part of our formation and worldview, that I think it warrants time in our worship as well.

For those who aren't familiar with the work of Barbara Brown Taylor, it may help you to know a little bit about her. These days, Taylor is primarily an author and speaker who was once an Episcopal priest and hospital chaplain. She's written several books on faith with topics such as why she left pastoring a church to teach world religions to curious college students,

to practicing spirituality in everyday life, to how we find God in the faith of others. In *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Taylor offers us an investigation of the dark and delves into the ways in which our faith influences how we see it. Rather than offer a quick-fix path *out* of the darkness, Taylor invites us to remain in it. Instead of desperately seeking the light at the end of the tunnel, she bids us to sit down and stay a while.

She begins the way I will, by noting that Christianity, especially, “has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From the earliest times,” she writes, “Christians have used darkness’ as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death” (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 7). This dichotomy between light and dark, good and evil, has also caused harmful stereotypes to be tied to people with dark skin tones or who are vision impaired. She wisely points out that God and Jesus are consistently tied to light. Jesus calls himself “the light of the world,” (John 8:12) and 1 John tells us “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). 1 Thessalonians calls us, “children of the light, children of the day. We are not of night or of the darkness” (5:5).

Taylor defines the church’s approach to darkness and light as “full solar spirituality,” observing, however, that this approach has its drawbacks. While things are good in your life or at least okay, full solar spirituality has its benefits and comforts. If things are going well, the perpetual light seems to be shining on you. Belief in a God who is light is easy. But what about when things aren’t going so well? What happens when a death or serious illness or tragedy befalls us or someone we love dearly? Then, we have a problem the church has more trouble with—and when the cliches of full solar Christianity no longer comfort, we’re left unable to cope. When the

world around us seems to have fallen into darkness, hearing that there is no darkness in God or that we are not of the darkness can lead us to believe we are along there. It is in these “dark times” (so-to-speak) that Christians are susceptible to losing their faith. My hope is that through this series, we can begin to rethink our relationship to “darkness” and begin to imagine that more lurks there than ghosts and goblins and nocturnal creatures. My hope is that by the end of this Lenten season, we begin to understand that God is not only waiting for you in the light at the end of the tunnel, but is in the darkness of the tunnel with you, right by your side, all the way.

The first lesson we read today from the book of Exodus begins to teach us of this very thing: God is not just in the light, but also in the dark places. In our reading, we find the Israelites, having left enslavement to Pharaoh, now in the midst of the wilderness. On their journey, the text tells us, The Lord guided them, seen in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Jewish theologian Amy-Jill Levine, in her commentary on this passage, notes that the two pillars were probably one—that the fire which guided by night was seen through the cloud, which was visible only in the day. One might argue that this is evidence of God as light, and that wouldn't be wrong, but it would be *incomplete*: if God is solely in the light, they would have no need of the pillar of cloud—they would only need the fire. But God comes in fire *and* cloud, light *and* darkness. Not just one or the other.

Later, in chapter 19, just before God gives Moses the commandments known as the decalogue—the “big ten” as I like to call them as a Penn State graduate—God appears in a cloud. So dangerous is the presence of the Lord in this cloud that the people cannot go near it, if they do they will

die. Taylor notes that this darkness is not demonized in this section, despite the fact that even distant proximity to this cloud provokes fear in the people so palpable that it rattles their teeth. She writes that “the fear of the Lord” evoked in this passage is “the fear of God’s pure being, so far beyond human imagining that trying to look into it would be like trying to look into the sun” (47), something anyone with any sense would tell you to never attempt doing. When we think of “the fear of the Lord,” we often think of punishment from God, but that’s not really what “fear of the Lord” means, at least not here. If we believe God to be a loving creator, father, and yes, even mother, then we do not fear God in the same way we might fear... I don’t know, Snow White’s Castle at Disney World. Theologically speaking, “Fear of the Lord” is much more complex than being afraid of God having a bad temper—“fear of the Lord” is the curious union of the senses of awe and adoration, gratitude, love, reverence, worship and fear that comes upon us at the understanding of the greatness of God. It is not for us to cower in a corner fearing God like the boogeyman, but rather, as Pope Francis put it, “a joyful awareness of God’s grandeur and a grateful realization that only in [God] do our hearts find true peace.” The Fear of the Lord is a gift, not a punishment. It is a fear more akin to how we might be afraid to hurt someone we love than it is the fear of being hurt by someone we love.

But up on that mountain in the cloud, Moses and the Israelites perhaps can’t get to the “fatherly” presence of God because the tremendous awe they feel chatters their teeth and threatens to tear them apart. Moses knows this aspect of God and is the only one who can survive such proximity to the numinous God theologian Rudolf Otto was so enamored

with discussing. The awe felt by the Israelites can only happen if they stay in the cloud, close enough, but not too close to the Holy Presence of the mysterious God they will be taught how to be obedient to. Wanting to draw nearer to God's presence but running from the darkness that surrounds them in the cloud would be like wanting to feel the rain, but never leaving the house and heading into the darkness of the stormy day. And so we're left to ask, if we only experience God in the light and are unwilling to look for God in the dark, what spiritual gifts and blessings and growth are we missing out on?

In many ways, the last two years have been a "dark" time and the news of late does not make it easier to see the light at the end of the tunnel. By all accounts, we are going to be shadowed by the clouds of the worst of human existence for a while longer. It's easy to get down when we think we can't find that light. When we see no end to the darkness that surrounds us. But as Moses learned in the midst of the cloud and Jesus encountered in the wilderness as he sat there with figurative darkness surrounding him, God is as present in the darkness as God is in the light. The Holy Spirit within us does not go to sleep when the lights go out, but is alive, active, working regardless of how bright or not our space is.

While I will probably never watch Snow White again, I eventually had to make friends with the darkness because life was going to throw a lot of it my way. We'll talk more about experiences of darkness in the coming weeks, so I won't go into all of that right now. If I never went into the darkness because of a bad experience when I was 4, however, I would never have learned how to catch fireflies running around with my brother during the summer outside in the field at my parents' home. If I could only

find God in the light moments of life, but not in the clouds, my faith wouldn't have survived the abuse that happened to me and the kids in our former home—if not for God's presence in the storm clouds that overshadowed us in that dark time, I would not have found the love of my life and I certainly would not be standing before you today. Over the next six weeks, we will talk more about learning to walk in the dark. We will temporarily leave the idea of full solar spirituality to the side as we explore the lunar spirituality we must develop if we are to have faith resilient enough to survive the darkest clouds life has to offer.

For now, as you look at the darkness in our world today worrying that you cannot see the light, remember that God is in that darkness, too.

Remember that Jesus did not enter the darkness of his wilderness time alone, but filled with the Spirit of God. Remember the pillar that guided the Israelites out of Egypt wasn't just the light of God's holy fire, but also the mysterious obscurity of the Divine cloud. May the God whose presence is not limited to light guide you in these challenging times and as you grow in faith this Lenten season. Amen.