

Sermon: The Way Out is In

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Scripture: Psalm 139:7-16, Mark 4:26-29

Like many X-ennials (those of us born in the odd space between Generation X and the Millennial generation), I am a fan of the angsty music of Canadian singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette. Her album *Jagged Little Pill* really helped me get through my moody teen phase and, though I could not relate to some of the very adult themes contained in it, the torment of her lyrics coincided well with the turbulence of being a teenager. Anyone who's ever been a teen has probably had some version of this kind of coping mechanism. Something we can really belt out when we need to rage at the world a bit. But now, with the angst of those early years mostly gone as I enter my... ahem... 40s... it's not that album of hers that sticks with me, but the later music of a world-wearier, but mature and hopeful Alanis.

One such song is titled, "Out is Through," with lyrics like: "Every time I'm confused,
I think there must be easier ways."
and
"The only way out is through,
the faster we're in the better."

The song is ostensibly referencing the challenges of relationships whose difficulties we'd rather find a quick fix for than really work on, but the lyrics can be applied more broadly to speak to those times in life when running from our problems is preferable to struggling through them. Often, the quick fix solution seems easier than the painstaking process of proper restoration. And yet, wisdom tells us that if we don't properly address problems, we're going to have bigger problems later. Anyone who's ever taken a shortcut on a home repair knows this lesson well. Duct tape can quick-fix a lot of problems, but chances are, it's not getting to the root of the issue for a long-term resolution and you'll pay for it later. The only way out of that problem for good is to properly address it.

Today, we are continuing through our series "Lunar Faith," using the book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* by Barbara Brown Taylor as our guide through the kind of spirituality that speaks to

God's presence with us even in the midst of the "darkest" moments of our life. Too often, darkness has been villainized. Christian scriptures frequently pit light against dark, with Jesus's own words to back that up. We cheer when daylight savings time returns because there are more hours of daylight and we dread the return to standard time when it's so dark so very early. But the truth is, life will not always be lived in the light. We know that's not possible. The sun rises and inevitably sets at some point every day of our lives (unless, I suppose, we live in a place in the world with months of sunshine or darkness 24 hours a day).

In the sixth chapter of her book, Taylor turns us to a new kind of darkness that differs from the kinds we've discussed so far. This time, she's talking about the voluntary darkness of a cave where no light naturally exists, where the only light you are capable of finding is the light you have hopefully brought with you. She's not talking about the caves popularly visited by tourists who want to see neat rock formations on a comfortable, even foot path, perhaps accessed with an elevator or steps constructed by human hands. She's talking about the kinds of caves that are off the beaten path, the ones with rocky sometimes narrow passageways that you might even have to squeeze through, that might sometimes be filled with water so that you must hold your breath to get to the other side. In the darkness of those caves, when your headlamp is turned off, it's so dark you can't see an inch ahead of you, let alone a few feet. This is kind of darkness most of us may never witness, but it is from this darkness that Taylor pulls profound spiritual insights. And in order to do that, she ventures into those very kinds of caves safely, and with experienced cave explorers to guide her.

One of the things Taylor discovers about caves, actually ties in quite well with our lesson from last week about paying attention. In the darkness of a cave, and in particular, while your headlamp is off, your sight does you no good whatsoever. In that complete darkness, you begin to notice something else. Not just the absence of visual sensation, but auditory as well. The silence begins to dawn on you. It's almost too quiet. Brown describes this kind of silence as both "completely alien and completely comforting at the same time," (122). This kind of silence is the silence of prayerfulness, of paying attention. Mary Oliver wrote in her poem "Praying," that this kind of paying attention leads to prayer at its simplest and most effective. She called it "the doorway into thanks, and a silence into which another voice may speak" (*Thirst*, 37). All of this

makes me wonder how we might find that kind of silence in a world as busy and bustling as ours. Jesus found it in the desert and atop mountains where he drew away from others. That kind of silence can be restorative, if we let it be.

But Taylor doesn't leave us with this reflection on the quietude of caving. She doesn't turn back and say we've learned all we can from this experiment. She presses on further, warned that as they venture deeper into the cave, they will need to pay close attention not just to what the cave looks like in front of them, but also to what the cave looks like behind them. The cave will not look the same on the way in as it does on the way out. For Alanis Morissette, "the only way out is through," but in the darkness of that cave, Taylor realizes there's no "through" in the darkness of the cave; the way out *is* the way in.

Without a way through, caves become a great kind of protection. In Jesus's day, "caves made the best kind of stables" (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 128) because there was no need to protect the animals from all sides. With only one way in or out, the animals can be easily corralled and will be difficult for more predatory animals to attack. Caves made natural and perfect stables.

In Bethlehem today, you can visit the Church of the Nativity on the West Bank, Palestine. You can see the outside of the church on the next slide . This church sits on the very spot where Jesus



is believed to have been born.

This is remarkable enough, to be sure, but what's even more surprising than the idea that we know where about Jesus was born is that the spot marked as his place of birth isn't, as

Taylor notes, "*in* the Church of the nativity but *under* it, in a small cave directly under the altar." On the next slide, we can see a glimpse of the spot, in the grotto of the church. Jesus, the light of the world, was born in a cave.

So this makes it even more remarkable as we think about that light resurrecting 32 years later... in the darkness of a cave.



We don't think of this as often as we should. We think about the stone being rolled away and Jesus stepping into the light, meeting Mary Magdalene there in the garden. This is a beautiful, light-filled image that we celebrate with song, worship, and smiles all around as we sing "Christ the Lord is Risen to-day on Easter morning." But the miracle of the resurrection didn't happen in the light where everyone could see him. It happens in the all-encompassing darkness of a cave in utter silence, with no warmth to surround him. Only the damp, cold stone and earthy scent in the air. Think about that: our Lord was born and is resurrected in the dark. We can pit light against dark all day long, the bible can be replete with this dichotomous image, but there's simply no escaping the simple fact that *our faith begins in the darkness*.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Whether it's a seed in the ground, baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark" (129). In Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells the Parable of the Growing Seed, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." The miracle of the growth of those seeds begins in the dark. The miracle of our birth begins in the dark. Some of the most profound moments in our walk of faith will happen in the dark, but only if we're willing to let that darkness do what it must.

There's a bill in congress this very moment to do away with the change in clocks that causes our daylight to end so early in the day during the winter months. We need that extra hour of light *back*, we think. Those who voted for it no doubt believe the light to be good and the dark to be

bad. But, in doing this study, I can't help but think of all the good that can happen in the dark. Darkness is restorative. From it springs life, growth, and resurrection. Far from being afraid of the dark, we should celebrate it. What gifts the darkness has given and continues to give us!

Psalm 139 tells us there is nowhere we can go from God's Spirit. We cannot flee from the presence of God. Not in the bright light of the celestial places and not in the darkness below. God follows us whether we fly, walk, crawl, or swim. It's important for us to understand God as one who is always with us. Since my earliest memories, I recall the feeling of being held, as if God is ever-present, holding me together. This Psalm speaks to that feeling. Importantly, it remarks, "even the darkness is not dark to [God]; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to [God]." There's a reason why this Psalm is my favorite and it fits in so beautifully with our message of the day. The darkness isn't something to fear, how can it be, if God is as present there as God is in the light?

We spend so much time in our lives trying to get through the darkness. We go to therapy hoping the person sitting across from us will help us get through. And there are some things that works for. But there are other times when we must abandon our Alanis Morrissette hopes for finding the way out by finding the way through, and realize that the way out is really the way in. There are times when we must sit in the darkness of our proverbial caves so that they can teach us what they're meant to teach us—so that we, too, might be resurrected in the darkness that is as light to God: the light of learning and of growth, the light that, as Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us can only be seen in the dark. When we only see God as one of light, we are missing the "unmistakably holy" God-with-us in the darkness. Sometimes, in order to grow in our faith, we have to, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "let go of [our] bright ideas about God so that [our] eyes are open to the God who is" (131). If I could write a song to challenge Alanis's beautifully written tome, it might go something like this:

the only way out is in
the darker the cave the better.
the only way out is in
God is there, too.

Amen.