

The Deep Darkness of Night

Sermon 10 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 17, 2019

Second Sunday Lent

Genesis 15: 1-8, 12-18

I used to be afraid of the dark. As a young child, I slept with a nightlight on or I'd ask my parents to leave the hall light on and my bedroom door cracked so the light could come in. I never watched scary movies – and still don't – because they cause me to have nightmares and feel unsafe in the darkness of night. My grandfather used to joke with me about monsters under the bed... that is until my mother informed him that I actually believed there could be monsters under the bed. When I had to get up in the middle of the night I'd jump off the side of the bed, rather than step off because I knew if my feet landed far enough away, the monsters couldn't grab my ankles and drag me under the bed. As a teenager, I'd learned that I couldn't go through the haunted houses or watch X-Files with my friends because what was intended for play and good old-fashioned fun, would ruin my sleep and make me a nervous wreck.

I used to be afraid of the dark.

As I grew up I let go of some of those childish fears. I no longer worried about monsters under my bed, but those old fears were quickly replaced by new ones. "Don't walk across campus alone at night" Campus Police told us at Furman's Freshman orientation. After the dinner shift at Outback Steakhouse my manager used to insist that someone walk me to the car. The monsters took on different shape and form but they were just as present as those fictional characters who used to lurk under my bed.

Somewhere along the way, I listened to these words of caution and I resolved for myself that in the deep darkness of night, life was unpredictable, unruly, and unsafe.

The language of darkness also has a long spiritual history. Written sometime between the years 60 and 90 CE or AD, Matthew and Mark both state that darkness fell over the earth from noon until 3pm after Jesus was crucified. For many interpreters this darkness signifies the absence of God in the aftermath of the cross.

1500 years later, themes of spiritual darkness show back up in famous literature. The best known probably being *The Dark Night*, written by St. John of the Cross in the 16th century. St. John was first known as Juan de Yepes y Álvarez. His father was an accountant for family members in the lucrative business of silk trade. His mother was an orphan who worked as a weaver. Juan's father was disowned by his family because of the marriage and the family therefore was forced to live in poverty. At 21 years old he joined the Jesuits and began a lifelong commitment to a monastic life. Eventually, he met Teresa of Ávila who would also become St. Teresa and together they set out to reform medieval monasticism. Nobody likes a reformer, so you might imagine that before they were

venerated and named Saints of the church, the two suffered grave consequences for their ideas and their behavior. For some time, John was imprisoned, starved, and beaten. But out of these moments of deep darkness for John, he wrote some of his most beautiful spiritual works, including the most famous book, *The Dark Night*.

The experience of darkness continued to grow in medieval Christianity and they remain today as Catholics and Protestants alike still use the term “the dark night of the soul” to describe moments of spiritual crisis along the journey toward God.

But to be fair to St. John of the Cross, the dark night is not an impediment to faith. Rather, it is a necessary experience of the journey toward God. Everyone experiences moments of darkness.

In this season of Lent, as we are trying to be more intentional about our spiritual journeys, many of us may already be experiencing our own dark nights of the soul. Maybe these dark moments are brought on by a cancer diagnosis or a long difficult treatment plan. Maybe they are marriages or relationships that seem to be falling apart. Maybe the dark night feels like depression or manifests as mental illness. Or maybe it’s just a time of doubt; you thought God was calling you in one direction and now all of a sudden it feels like a strange fit. The dark night of the soul is a spiritual condition that can happen to anyone at any time.

In today’s reading from the book of Genesis we meet Abram in a moment of spiritual crisis. Until now, he has been faithfully following God’s direction. He left his homeland and set out into the wilderness following God’s promise to give him land. And he trusted when God promised him children, descendants to carry on his family name, his legacy. Up until now, the story of Abram could be summarized as: God speaks; Abram listens. God promises; Abram believes. God commands; Abram obeys. But in today’s reading we meet Abram in a moment of doubt a moment in which he cries out to God, “Wait a minute! I have a question.”¹

“What will you give me, for I continue childless?” Abram contests.

In the wilderness, Abram begins to question God and the promise that he might be the father of faith and a people as numerous as the stars... here in the wilderness, Abram experiences doubt.

I don’t know about you, but for me, it gives me great comfort to know that even Abram, who is one of the patriarchs of our faith has moments of doubt. It gives me comfort to see him struggling in the wilderness, it helps me to know that in my own journey, in my own wilderness, when the promise of God’s calling that started this whole journey begins to fade... when I fail to see how we’re going to get to the promised land, it helps me to read

¹ Daniel M. Debevoise in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 2, p. 50.

Abram's questions right here in the *Bible*. Hearing Abram ask, when will the promise come helps me know that when I question, I am not alone.

The story continues, "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep terrifying darkness descended upon him." In that deep terrifying darkness, God narrates the story of Abrams descendants. It is a strange but realistic way of reiterating the promise. Yes, Abram, I will give you children. So many to carry on your name, your story, your legacy, your faith. But just as it is for you, Abram, their journey will not be without its trials in the wilderness.

As descendants of Abram ourselves we have the benefit of hindsight. We can look back on history and read the stories of our faith which tell us about the journey toward God. The journey that begins with the Spirit beckoning us into the wilderness, the journey that acknowledges there will be moments of doubt, and the journey that is built on these ancient stories which remind us that even in those moments of doubt, those dark nights of the soul, God is still with us.

In fact, some might argue the darkness is where it all begins.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that, "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."² Hearing this quote from Taylor reminds me of the first words of our *Bible* which state:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... God called the light Day and the darkness Night. And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day. God continued creating, making two great lights, the greater to rule the day and the lesser to rule the night... And at the end of it all, God saw that it was good. All of it. Darkness and light, day and night.³

I'm also reminded of Jacob who wrestles with God under the cover of darkness, and when daybreak comes, he departs with a limp and a new name, Israel, the one who struggles with God.

Times of darkness often feel like struggle and chaos, they define moments when we cry out to God "Where are you?" "Are you listening?" "Do you care about me anymore?" "Do you remember the promise?" "Are you even there anymore?" And far too often, as people of faith we feel like we shouldn't utter those words. We worry that they mean we have lost hope and fallen out of relationship with God.

Some of you may feel like this today, right now.

² Barbara Brown Taylor quote shared on Twitter by Rachel Held Evans (@rachelheldevans) on 3/14/19.

³ Genesis, chapter 1

I wonder how many of you woke up on Friday to the news out of New Zealand and asked God, "how can this be?"

I wonder how many of you looked at a loved one who is suffering this week and asked God, "why aren't you helping?"

I wonder how many of you dealt with some kind of anxiety or loss or temptation or grief and wanted to cry out to God, "where are you? Come help me."

Many are saying that we are in a time of spiritual crisis as a people, as a country, as a human race. Church attendance is in decline, individualism is on the rise. Threats of violence plague our streets, our schools, and even our most sacred spaces. Language of hatred and judgment flow from our lips more readily than words of love and compassion.

Recognizing this reality makes me want to echo the cries of Abram and shout out,

Where is the promise?
Where are the heirs of the faith?
Why must this wilderness drag on and on?

Where is God amidst all of our darkness?

I used to be afraid of the darkness. But the more time I spend with these ancient stories and with people of great faith, the more I recognize that I've got nothing to fear.

I don't need to be afraid of the darkness because even in the deepest darkness of night I know that God is there to join us in the struggle, to hear our cries for help and to bring us through the struggle with a new name and a renewed promise.

We don't need to be afraid of the darkness because we can look back and read the stories of creation in which God pulls light from dark and calls both of them good. We can identify with the journey of Abram who questioned if his promised child would ever come. We can be encouraged by the testimonies of Jacob and St. John of the Cross and we can rest assured that our struggle through the darkest nights are just as important (if not more so) than the days when all is well with our souls.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it better than anyone else in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

Like darkness itself, the dark night of the soul means different things to different people. Some use the phrase to describe the time following great loss, while others remember it as the time leading up to a difficult decision. Whatever the

circumstances, what the stories have in common is their description of a time when the soul was severely tested, often to the point of losing faith, by circumstances beyond all control. No one chooses the dark night; the dark night *descends*.

When it does, the reality that troubles the soul most is the apparent absence of God. If God is light, then God is gone. There is no soft glowing space of safety in this dark night. There is no comforting sound coming out of it, reassuring the soul that all will be well. Even if comforting friends come around to see how you are doing, they are about as helpful as the friends who visited Job on his ash heap. There is an impenetrability to this darkness that isolates the soul inside it. For good or ill, no one can do your work for you while you are in this dark place. It has your name all over it, and the only way out is through.⁴

Each of us is on a spiritual journey. We are on individual paths and we are on a shared path here at Greystone. And we know that dark nights will come. They will descend upon us individually and collectively. But we don't have to be afraid of the dark, we have no reason to fear because we believe in a God who is with us even in the deepest darkness of night. And we know that our God, who is the God of Abram and Jacob and St. John of the Cross and Barbara Brown Taylor too, *that* God is with us even in the deep darkness of night, struggling, wrestling, and sometimes even carrying us through to the promised land.

It may look like nothing but darkness as far as we can see.
But we don't have to be afraid of the dark anymore.

Amen.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. p 133-134.