

An Apology for Darkness

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“...while it was very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place...”

For the past 20 years, our family has spent considerable time at a YMCA family camp in the Boundary Waters Wilderness Area in northern Minnesota. One year as a fundraiser, the camp auctioned off an evening with a local expert on the area's wolf packs. We bid to win, and we did. With young kids in tow we drove from camp to the end of a lonely road, parked our car, and waited, as instructed, in the complete and utter darkness. In that part of the world there's no cell service, or cars, or streetlights or people – just a black thick veil of night punctuated only by the sounds of frogs and insects and the occasional Barred Owl.

After awhile a pick-up truck approached and out jumped the strangest looking man we'd ever seen. It was Jim Schwartz – a modern day John the Baptist of sorts, all decked out in his dirty lumberjack shirt and mud-clad boots. Jim had worked for the International Wolf Center in town for over 25 years, tracking and tagging the area packs. Without saying hello, he opened the van's sliding door and jumped in. “Now I'm not promising anything, people,” he said in a booming, frantic voice, “Finding wolves in the woods is like a needle in a haystack. Just be quiet and do what I tell you.” The kids cowered in the back seat. He was terrifying.

Off we drove – Jim pointing the way deeper and deeper into the woods. The roads narrowed: first pavement, then gravel, then two-track, guided only by our headlights which, even on bright, felt like a flickering candle against the expanse of blackness. Eventually, Jim told us to stop the car, and lined us up against the van. Standing in the darkness he taught us how to howl like a wolf pack. The kids howled like pups (wah, wah, wah), I howled like a juvenile (yip, yip), and Michael and Jim howled like the leaders of the pack, the dominants (upswing siren). Then, like a symphony conductor, Jim raised his arms and signaled us to start howling, which we did for a good two minutes, as loud as we possibly could. Then he dropped his arms and we were silent. As we tilted our heads and strained our ears we heard....nothing. And so it went for nearly two hours – we'd go through the whole process and strain our ears into the abyss. Nothing.

By 1:00 am, the kids were fast asleep and we felt both dejected and sick of the nut in the passenger seat. We turned back toward camp and came upon a particular bend in the road where the trees had grown over the road and met in the middle, making a kind of a tree tunnel. And there a wolf pup sprung from the woods, crossing in front of us. “Stop the car!” Jim yelled. We piled out, got the signal and howled. There was a fleeting silence

and then – a wolf pack – pups, juveniles, and one dominant – howled back at such close range we could hear each different voice spread out in the brush alongside the road. Back and forth we volleyed – we howled, then silence, then the wolves until Jim, who could tell the dominant was getting stressed out, told us to get back in the van. It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my life. Something significant shifted inside of me – the danger, fear, and anxiety I had always associated with the dark and the unknown became something else – a face-to-face experience of the Living God. It was quiet in the van on the hour-long drive back to camp. Later when I tucked my son into bed he took my cheeks in his dimpled hands and said simply, “Mom, that was the chance of a lifetime.”

It’s a funny thing, darkness. Christianity has few nice things to say about it. From earliest times, the Church has equated darkness with sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. “Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness...” we pray. The synonym comes directly from the Bible, which includes almost one hundred references to darkness. In most the verdict is unanimous: darkness is bad news. In so many of the Hebrew Scriptures, light stands for life and darkness for death. When God is angry with people, they are plunged into darkness. Locusts darken the land. People grope in the dark.

And yet....even in our scriptural tradition, *that is not the whole story*. So many important things in the Bible happen in darkness: Jacob wrestles the angel, Joseph dreams his dreams, God parts the Red Sea, manna falls from the sky in the wilderness. We know the story about Abraham, about how he is full of doubt as to whether God follows through on promises, if he and his wife Sarah will ever have children. Abraham rails at God, who, instead of arguing, tells the old man to go outside and look up at the sky. “Count the stars, if you are able,” God tells Abraham, for “so shall your descendants be.” It’s a lesson and a promise that could have happened, perhaps, in the heat of the day – but the close darkness of night is the key element in Abraham’s decision to trust God. In such stories, in these images, thick darkness reveals a particular access to divine presence – where we can be drawn into the fascinating mystery of the Living God.

We see darkness work its magic again in this morning’s Gospel from Mark. Jesus has been working miracles on the Sea of Galilee’s northern shore. He moves from one place of suffering to the next tending to the people, giving them everything he has, casting out demons, healing dis-ease and restoring outcasts. After all that ministry, Jesus retreats for rest. But sleep is not enough. Jesus gets up, *while it was still very dark*, and goes *to a deserted place to pray*. Jesus needs more darkness. The Gospeler Mark, of course, gives us the action without any commentary. Mark never has time for details. Just – Jesus needed darkness. We do know that Jesus was fully human which means that, like us from time to time, he experienced human emotions like feeling exhausted, depleted, discouraged, maybe scattered and unsure or even full of grief tending so many people, being pressed in upon by the crowds. And I wonder if Jesus moves toward the darkness because there he knows he can see and hear and watch more acutely for the Living God. There is something in the darkness Jesus needs. Clarity? Comfort? Assurance? Energy? Whatever Jesus’ need, God meets it there in the dark. When the disciples come find Jesus, he’s ready to go back into the fray.

If you're like me, *seeking* darkness is a tall order to will – with all of its instability, sorrow, and danger. When, despite all of my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my own life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, my first response is never “oh goody!” When I see darkness coming, or realize I'm already there, I'm more likely run away or deny it. I associate darkness with times in my life when I lost someone or something important, or sustained a terrible grief, when I am confused or terribly afraid, when there's a significant transition or change wanted or unwanted, when the tension is almost unbearable and I honestly don't know what to do or where to turn. Darkness is no fun. It can last a long time or a short time. It has been known to descend hard and fast, sometimes even without our awareness. But what our scriptures tell us is that when we find ourselves in the midst of it, it's good to remember that God does his best work in darkness. For it's there that we are poised, when we're ready, to best receive what God has to teach us, or show us, or move us or heal us. “This darkness and cloud is always between you and God,” wrote the anonymous 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, “and it prevents you from seeing [God] clearly by the light of understanding in your reason....So set yourself to rest in this darkness for as long as you can...for if you are to experience [God] or see [God] at all...it must always be in this cloud, and in this darkness.” Darkness is dangerous, to be sure, and awful, and disorienting. Honestly, no one wants to be there. But we do find ourselves there, and the Good News is that God is there, too.

You may know yourself to be in darkness right now. Or we may feel that we're in a bit of darkness, together, in this St. David's moment of transition and change and unknowing. If you're one of the lucky ones who is, for now, standing in blazing light, it's true to say you'll be in darkness again. Sorry. For all of us, wherever we are spiritually, our Christian tradition offers some paths for those of us who want to learn how to walk in the dark. First: *slow way down*. I'm not sure why we start moving faster and more frenetically when we find ourselves in a dark time. I think about the experience of touring an abandoned mine – when they take you down into the earth on a freight elevator, down, down, down – and then the tour guide, who always seems to be a kid, turns out the lights to show how dark darkness can be, and you can't see your hand in front of your face. In those instances, our last impulse is to speed up, to run around in circles with our arms stretchend out groping for something sturdy? We stay put, hunker down, and wait for the kid to turn the light back on. Learning to calm in the darkness is patient, unsettling work. It cannot be rushed. In the dark we allow ourselves to bump into things that frighten us, knowing that we're more resilient if we're moving slowly. Darkness is the time to *not* take on that one more thing, cram in another project, fill all time with work and distractions. Darkness is time to be willing to disappoint a few people as we claim the space we need to move more intentionally.

Finally, in darkness, curiosity is our best friend. Once the cloud has descended, once we do what we can to slow down a bit, it's time to take a look around. I call this the “art of noticing.” What do we notice around us? Darkness heightens our senses, remember, sharpen our instincts, make us more receptive. What can we see with the eyes of the heart? If you hear anything this morning please hear this: as spiritual people we need

darkness as much as the light. “To know the dark, go dark,” writes the poet Wendell Berry. “Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings.” AMEN.

Sources:

Biblical accounts of darkness, from *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor, pp. 43-49; Emilie Griffin, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 15; Quote from “To Know the Dark” by Wendell Berry is from *Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, p.133.