

## 2020 01 05 – Radiant Darkness

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

“Arise your light is come!” We know that the season of Epiphany has arrived when we read, hear or sing this well-known phrase. It is the essential message of the season. We associate Jesus, God, goodness, freedom, joy and even life itself with light. There are also many images for light that are used during this season. What are some the ways we illustrate the light of Epiphany, God's light?  
*(wait for answers – candles, stars, sun's rays, lanterns, halos)*

During this season our scripture readings, our hymns and our prayers are filled with these images of light, images of God's presence, images of salvation. In Isaiah we read,

“darkness still covers the earth  
and dense clouds enshroud the peoples,  
upon you YHWH now dawns,  
and God's glory will be seen among you!”

The Hebrew prophet wrote these words shortly after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. They returned to a country that had been destroyed by war and were grieving all that had been lost. With these words, Isaiah delivers a message of hope to a people who are currently living in darkness.

Darkness. We tend to understand darkness as the opposite of light. Darkness is scary. Most of us learn to fear the dark at a very young age. Barbara Brown

Taylor, retired priest, author and well-known speaker, tells of her own childhood experience of the dark:

“Come inside now, it’s getting dark.” That is my mother speaking, saying the same thing she said every night when she looked out the kitchen window and saw that the sun was going down. It did not matter whether the window was in Kansas, Ohio, Alabama, or Georgia. Dark was dark, and she wanted her children inside. It must have cost her a lot to call us, since it meant that the quiet house would soon be filled with the noise of three small, loud girls, but she did it anyway. She loved us enough to let us play outside until the cicadas cranked up and bats started swooping through the sky; then she loved us enough to call us inside so that nothing bad would happen to us in the dark. (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pages 1 & 2)

For many of us, darkness isn’t just scary, it is downright evil. Darkness represents all that is wrong with the world: hate, violence, imprisonment, suffering, and even the absence of God. This understanding is reflected in our language. We talk about the worst times of our lives as, “periods of darkness,” or even “the dark night of the soul.” In today’s world, we now have the “dark web” where people gather to enable some of the vilest acts of humankind.

But this common understanding of dark as bad and light as good has caused great harm in our world. It is even one of the reasons for systemic racism.

Anthony Bailey, a United Church minister, and a black man, gives us the historical background for this issue:

In the 1700s, German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote: “Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below...at the lowest point.” Before this time, the positive and negative aspects of light and dark were not systematically assigned to different peoples. Once this separation of peoples based on race became entrenched in education, science, economic, social, and political policies and activities of colonial conquest and enslavement, it was virtually impossible to use these terms in ways devoid of a racist agenda.

<https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/light-and-dark-imagery.pdf>

Today, this understanding of the dichotomy of light and dark is so entrenched that we are unconscious of its impact. Many of us, with our white skin, are oblivious to the internalized racism impacting some of our darker-skinned neighbours. We don't even notice the people in South Asia using skin-lighteners or the people of the Caribbean taking great efforts to ensure that their skin does not become any darker. We don't realize how our “internalized notions of light and darkness as good and evil permeate aspects of our everyday life.”

<https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/speaking-darkness-advent>

In an attempt to understand darkness in a new holistic way, Barbara Brown Taylor researched and wrote a book called, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In the introduction to this book, she wrote the following words:

Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me – that I want no part of – either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out... If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love.

At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

*(Learning to Walk in the Dark, pages 4 & 5)*

Yes, it's true, darkness is not all bad. In her book, Barbara Brown Taylor explores many positive aspects of the dark including the fact that we need darkness so that we can see the light, in particular starlight. If you think about it the astrologers (or Magi), in today's passage from the book of Matthew, would never have found Jesus without the black backdrop of the night sky. You can't observe the rising of a star in broad daylight.

The darkness of the night also allows us to get a good night's sleep. Nearly 20 years ago, I moved to Baffin Island to work for a few months. It was late spring and, at that time of the year, the sun never went down. Every night I found

myself waking up in the early morning hours unable to go back to sleep. Within a week I was sick and I knew I needed to do something to survive this unending light. So I put several layers of dark plastic on my bedroom window and they remained there for the rest of my stay. I learned the hard way that darkness is essential for my health.

But even more amazing is the fact that darkness is often the place where we meet God. In the Bible we find many stories that illustrate this fact. Stories such as: Jacob wrestling with God in his sleep; Moses meeting God in a dark cloud on Mount Sinai; and the shepherds finding Jesus in the darkness of a stable. It is often in our darkest moments that we come to know the comforting and challenging presence of the Holy Spirit.

I believe this is the message that Isaiah was giving to the people of Judah. They were living in the darkness of grief and despair and yet their prophet was giving them a message of hope. He was telling them that God was there with them, that God's light had already come. He told them to "Lift up your eyes, and look around." It is in the radiant darkness that we are able to see shimmers of God's light of love and compassion. It is in the radiant darkness that we first realize that we are not alone. It is in the radiant darkness that we learn to recognize the presence of the Essence of Love in our lives.