

Osler Mennonite Church - May 3, 2015

Holy Darkness

John 3 by Patty Friesen

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, John intends the night to represent the darkness of unbelief. John is into dualities not subtleties – light versus dark, belief versus unbelief. Everything is one or the other with John and Nicodemus represents one who came in the dark of doubt and fear and his faith stayed in the darkness.

Typically in scripture, darkness is good. In fact, the biblical story begins in darkness with the spirit of God moving over the face of the deep. Out of the dark and deep God brings light, but God does not abolish the dark. Eternal dark is not good but the divine response is not eternal light. It is a separation of night and day, dark and light. The day is for on-going creation and the night is for rest. Night is when God frequently assures his people. In Genesis 15:5, God takes Abraham outside at night and reassures him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. God visits people in their dreams that we can assume are happening at night. Darkness protects God's people as they escape Egypt at night and the Hebrew spies escape Jericho at night. The Holy Family escapes Bethlehem at night as does Paul escape Damascus in a basket at night. Finally the mystery of the resurrection came out of the darkness of the tomb. A re-creation and re-birth from the Genesis story.

I'd like to reframe Nicodemus' night as holy darkness. Night is a quiet, safe place to meet Jesus and talk heart to heart. Personally, I'm glad the light has not overcome the darkness. As someone who needs a lot of sleep, this time of year of growing light is killing me. Growing up in northern Alberta during the summer, our parents had to put

black plastic bags over our bedroom windows to make it dark enough so we could sleep. Darkness is good and necessary for rest and release and trust in God. All creation: seeds, birds, animals and people need darkness.

In addition to rest and divine communication, the night also plays a role in pointing us to the grandeur of God. In Psalm 8 and 19 the stars and moon testify to a creator God who is much bigger than us. Quoting the Advent Sourcebook (p.11), “Darkness provides us with a therapeutic limit-experience, illuminating the meagerness of human resources for experiencing, understanding and communicating the divine. It reminds us that God alone has an adequate idea of who God is and that even our most successful efforts at understanding God are inadequate. When darkness induces modesty, humility, faith and trust, it leads to a communion with God as God really is: it frees us from the self-deception of worshipping gods of our own making.”

St. John of the Cross writing in sixteenth century Spain was the first Christian mystic to describe darkness or the dark night of the soul as a necessary part of the Christian journey. He describes the darkness as the time when all the good feelings about God and the ability to pray falls away. This happens to us following the death of a loved one or a divorce or diagnosis when everything we have known comes to a screeching halt and our familiar ways of relating to God no longer work. It is like standing in a dark room. We become accustomed to the dark and can make out the vague shapes of a table here, a chair there but we mostly have to feel our way along. There is nothing we can do to feel closer to God, to experience the insights or consolations of prayer as we once did. In the dark night of the soul, nothing we do can generate or control the feelings we once had about God. This is precisely because God is now moving us along another road. The

challenge is to accept the darkness. Someone said, If I really can believe it is God working in this time, I don't mind the darkness so much. What really disturbs me is that I may have lost God.

We may fear the darkness and losing God or our faith in it that we avoid the very Mystery we long to encounter. So much of our theology is about the light and certainty of Christ. The time of questioning, and the time of darkness is treated as a failure of faith or a weakness of will. Opening to the darkness is countercultural – not only to the larger can-do, feel-good Western culture but also to a dominant Christian culture which emphasizes that God will reward us and give us good gifts of peace, happiness, contentment, prosperity and so on. Christian writer Jean Blomquist says, Perhaps what we should be seeking is transformation in God, not good feelings about God. The purpose of the dark night is purification, which leads to transformation and ultimately to freedom – freedom to be our true selves, to love and live in God and to be filled with God.

Hymn writer Brian Wren wrote #233 in the blue hymnal called Joyful is the Dark – just for this very reason that he thought we needed to redeem the dark. Verse one talks about the holy, hidden God of darkness who birthed creation in verse 2, who birthed Jesus in verse 3 and birthed the resurrection in verse 4. It's a lovely poetic hymn – about the darkness as a birthing place. And for all his railing against the dark, even John the gospel writer realizes that Jesus' words about the second spiritual birth is such an intimate conversation that it must take place at night outside the official office hours of the Sanhedrin. In history, any movement of God outside the official religious order took place at night. The early Anabaptists met at night in secret or in the safety of dark caves

and cellars. The African-American slaves met for worship at night and embraced the night as a time of escape as did the Israelite slaves out of Egypt. Maybe even Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth events that go all night have spiritual impact. Spiritual transformation needs darkness.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke has perhaps given us the best language for faith in the darkness of God in *The Book of Hours* - Poem #1.2 When I lean over the chasm of myself – it seems my God is dark and like a web: a hundred roots silently drinking. This is the ferment I grow out of. More I don't know, because my branches rest in deep silence, stirred only by the wind. And #1.11 You, darkness, of whom I am born – I love you more than the flame that limits the world to the circle it illumines and excludes all the rest. But the dark embraces everything: shapes and shadows, creatures and me, people, nations – just as they are. It let me imagine a great presence stirring beside me. I believe in the night.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her spiritual memoir on darkness called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, writes beautifully of an east coast snowstorm that took the power out for four days...By day three, I had acquired a physical dread of the dark. The moment the sun went down at six, everything got colder and harder to do. I trod on things underfoot with no idea what they were. I learned to recognize the sweaters in my closet by feel instead of sight. Everywhere I turned, the darkness illuminated my helplessness. I could not watch a movie, could not work on my computer, could not do laundry, could not even walk across the room without fear of bashing my shin. I had lost power. I was without power. I had no power. On day four, I decided that a power outage would make

a good Lenten discipline. Never mind giving up chocolate or booze for six weeks. For a real taste of self-denial, just turn off the power for a while.

Camp Shekinah volunteer Peter Schroeder had this testimony of the dark...Several years ago in fall I was doing some volunteer work at Shekinah. My accommodation was on one of the cabins up on the hill nestled among the trees. I had a long visit after supper with the staff at the Timberlodge before retreating to the cabin. When I left the Timberlodge, it was totally dark and we couldn't find a flashlight. I could see the beginning of the trail, however, but after three tries to stay on the path, I kept ending up in the bush. I was getting very flustered. Then I thought to myself...what would a blind person do in this situation? So I closed my eyes, and focused on feeling the trail with my feet. This worked very well and I reached the cabin.

In the absence of light, we find that God has graced us with many ways of feeling our way along the path. The dark rounds out our perspective. We would not know light if we did not also know darkness. The dark offers us humility – we won't always see well in life and what is coming down the path. The dark offers us a chance to rest and see God in new ways. The dark allows us to be present to the moment.

We are entering the season of greatest light – working up to summer solstice on June 21 and our Sunday School picnic and all nighter campout at Pineview Farm for those who want to enjoy light late into the night. But in the midst of all this light and gardening, farming activity this time of year, I invite us to find what remains of darkness and meditate on Nicodemus' nighttime faith and Jesus' words of rebirth and what God may be drawing us towards in the dark.

Let us pray...May we trust the Holy, may we trust the darkness, may we trust that
this is a holy darkness. #653 Abide With Me