



Congregational Church of La Jolla
Rev. Tim Seery
March 13, 2022

Walking in the Dark **Psalm 88**

Let us pray:

Gracious and Holy God, May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight. Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Some of you are reading a book with us this Lent by Barbra Brown Taylor called “Learning to Walk in the Dark.” If you are a part of our group and are reading the book with us then much of what you are about to hear will be quite familiar. But if you aren’t reading the book with us then this will help orient you to some of the best nuggets of what we’ve talked about so far and hopefully encourage you to take a look at this book sometime in the future or better yet join our next book group when that launches this summer. Barbra Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest who left active ministry in the church to teach writing at a small college in Georgia. Since then she has become an important writer in the genre of progressive Christian thought — helping us reflect on the ways that God shows up in our often complex, sometimes confusing ordinary reality. The book that I chose to guide us through Lent this year is called “Learning to Walk in the Dark.” Which I figured was most appropriate not only because Lent is a season of reflection, repentance, and companioning Jesus through the desert—and deserts can sometimes be places of intense darkness—but because for the entirety of this decade we have been learning to walk in the dark. That doesn’t necessarily mean that what has transpired has been evil or sinister. Barbara encourages us to reframe our very notions of what darkness is. Darkness very often is not dangerous, evil, or bad. Darkness is often, very good. Healthy. Necessary. Our bodies crave darkness in order to rest and reset. Our world is saturated with blue light emitting devices—phones, tables, and computers, saturated with security lights, flood lights, motion sensor lights, that true darkness is somewhat of a rarity anymore. Darkness is also a state of unknowing, of uncertainty, of not knowing what is around us nor where we are going. And that, in my opinion, perfectly captures the state of the world for most of this current decade.

Our cultural obsession with eradicating darkness in all its forms with the proliferation of security lights, electronic devices, devices some of which including just about every iPhone version in use, contain a built in flashlight so that at the click of a button whatever darkness in which we find ourselves can be quickly and totally vanquished. In fact, they’ve made the flashlight feature so easy to use on an iPhone that sometimes I find it mysteriously turns on without my knowledge as if my iPhone feels a pressing need to assist me in proactively filling my life with ever more beams of intense unsolicited light. As creatures that need darkness for our own healthy functioning, our own circadian rhythm, it would seem then that we’ve become almost allergic to

the dark. I must admit that on days when I visit the church late at night to pick up a book or collect mail I feel a tinge of anxiety as I walk through this back door into the side room where my hand quickly migrates to the light switch that whose precise location I've memorized. But even that small amount of light can't penetrate the darkness of this vast sanctuary which sits before me like a giant cave. And it takes some courage to dive into that total darkness to get to the other side— but it doesn't last for long the lights in the fellowship hall come on with a motion sensor—almost as if they are merciful and empathetic to us humans discomfort with all things relating to the dark.

Whether physical or metaphorical — whether it is literal darkness or simply our way of describing the discomfort of the unknown, our book study is taking up these questions of why we are so afraid of the dark and what we can do to become more comfortable with it, to learn to walk in the dark, and to even possibly thrive in the dark.

Psalms 88, which you heard Annie read, is unique among psalms for its intense focus on darkness. There's several different commentaries on it but one thought is that the narrator is suffering from the metaphorical darkness of a disease—possibly leprosy—or some other unclean illness. But what is unique about it is that the sense of helplessness and gloom is unresolved. Even the other psalms which are psalms of lamentation leave open some glimmerings of hopefulness, while this one on the other hand, retains its focus on darkness to the very end.

And darkness is surely used as a familiar metaphor in this psalm for everything that has gone wrong... the psalmist laments that he's in the lowest pit, he's overwhelmed, overcome with despair, afflicted with the weight of terror which he states has swept over him and even engulfed him. We don't know why, but all we know is the deep sense of profound darkness that has washed over the psalmist. I've always said that our psalms offer us a wide range of emotions—they display the wide variety of feelings accessible to humans and offer us ancient glimpses of the ways in which faithful people who lived in ancient times contended with the range of both joys and sorrows that are embedded into the human journey. And it is indeed true that we are capable of experience the extreme peaks of happiness, we too are capable of experiencing and feeling profound helplessness, suffering, and and grief. This psalm is offering a truthful picture of the human experience—a sense of honesty about the realities of the human condition. But if we believe that the divine exists everywhere and is in everything and in every time and every place then it would be true that God was beside our psalmist even in his darkest hour, even though he could not perceive the presence of God, even though he felt abandoned, it seems our psalmist was just beginning his journey of learning to walk in the dark.

Barbra Brown Taylor gives us three steps to begin our walk through the dark. Whether we are entering a time of metaphorical darkness or are about to plunge ourselves into the depths of a literal cavernous blackness she reminds us that the process of learning to be in the dark is not one that can be rushed. The first step is to give up running the show. Which, is easier said than done. Second, she says, we must be willing to sign the waiver that allows us to bump into things

that might frighten us at first. And then finally, the last step, is asking the darkness to teach us things we need to know.

She says that if we do this, we will become brave and curious about exploring what she calls the “nightlife of the soul.” She goes on to remind us that even when light fades and darkness falls—as it does every day when the sun crosses the horizon, God does not hand the world over to some other being. Even when we cannot see where we are going and no one answers our call, this is not sufficient proof that we are not alone. The divine presence transcends all of our language for calling it to our aid. Darkness, she says, is not dark to God. The night sky is as bright as the day.

On the cover of the bulletin I put a photo of Rothko Chapel, this is something I’ve talked about before, when we were worshiping during Covid. It is in Houston and it was designed by abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko who worked primarily in the immediate aftermath of the second world war in which he and his contemporaries were forced to contend with the big questions of existence highlighted ever so poignantly by the newfound nuclear threat of war and the questions about humanity, evil, and darkness brought forth by the Holocaust. His large color block paintings are graceful and exquisite and are meant to evoke an emotional experience in viewers. Most of his work is in vividly bright oranges, blues, yellows... almost neon and electric in intensity. However when tasked with the construction of a sacred space he opted for color tinted black panels. The chapel contains 14 of these color hued black canvases. Which are an invitation into a sense of meditative darkness, a glimpse of the infinite. At first glance, the paintings appear to be made up of solid, dark colors. But in person, looking closely, it becomes evident that the paintings are composed of many uneven washes of pigment that create variations in every inch. Stepping back, waves of subtle color difference appear across the broad surfaces — leading to an unmistakable impression of physical depth. In other words, they invite the viewer to interrogate the darkness, to notice the darkness, and to learn to be, to walk, to exist in the dark.

Darkness is not something to be feared but something to learn from. Something that gives us a taste of the infinite beyond. Something that has something to teach us.

There’s a story that Barbara tells that extols the lessons that darkness can teach children...as it is most of the time the case that our fear of the dark has its origins in the story of darkness that we learned as children. There was a Scottish writer who tells the story of having to go out and put the used milk bottles at the end of the driveway every night. Though the driveway was only 200 yards long it was in a deep darkness bending around a corner where the lights of the house did not reach. And for as bad as he wanted to run he couldn’t while carrying so many glass milk bottles. And he walked dutifully into the dark eagerly awaiting the moment he could put them down at the end of the driveway and run back into the safety of his home’s light as fast as possible. However, his parents knew the value of giving him an experience of darkness that was not dangerous but rather instructive. He said that his sense of courage was developed through those nighttime walks to the end of the driveway to take out the old milk bottles.

As our world continues its walk in the dark, may we have the wisdom to stop and ask this darkness what it is trying to teach us. May we approach it with curiosity and not the desire to banish it. And may we better embrace physical darkness, something that our bodies crave, and need. And most importantly may we realize that God is bigger than any of our concepts, images, metaphors and words and exists right beside us no matter what form of darkness we might find ourselves.

Let us then learn to walk in the dark.

Amen.