

Darkness and Light

March 5, 2023; Second Sunday in Lent; RCL Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

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**In Him there is no darkness at all,
The night and the day are both alike;
The Lamb is the light of the city of God
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.**

*In the name of God~ who is Love, who is Light,
who is Life Everlasting, Amen.*

We are only a week away from “springing forward”- moving our clocks an hour ahead and (unfortunately) losing an hour of sleep in the process. Beginning our day in pre-dawn darkness is the trade-off for being able to take walks after dinner and work in our yards, and farmers can plow until late in the evening, the golden rays of the late-setting sun falling over the river and the mountains and the newly-greening fields. Our whole earth seems to awaken, to stretch, to reach up with gladness

towards the brightness and warmth of the sun and the blessings that light brings to our world.

Daylight savings time is, of course, a human invention from the World War 1 era, when it helped to conserve desperately needed energy resources, as well as to shift the pattern of increased daylight for the greater productivity of farms and their desperately needed food supply. Some people believe that it is no longer necessary or helpful but it's still around, and it impacts us twice a year as we try and reset our bodies to spring forward or fall back. We can't help it- as human beings we are wired to structure our lives so that we are constantly seeking and turning towards the light.

And yet, as faithful people we know that this is only a feeble attempt to be in control, that it is God alone who orchestrates the delicate and always-shifting balance between light and darkness and created us to seek God's

presence in both night shadows and bright daylight spaces. The narrative of our salvation history begins with the story of light and darkness- telling of how when God's Spirit moved over the face of the deep and God began to create the heavens and the earth that light and darkness were created before anything else. God speaks light into existence, calls it "good", and separates the light from the darkness, forever claiming them as God's own by giving them names: day and night. The sun lights one, the moon another, but as today's psalm says, it is God that has made all things and reigns over them. Because of this moment, there will be evening and morning, the day brightening and then fading back into the night's darkness, as long as this world shall remain. Any true understanding of light and darkness must begin here, when God's naming of light and darkness declares that they both belong to God.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures light is associated with God and God's word, with salvation, with truth, and

with life. God is described as the light of the righteous; God's word "is a lamp unto thy feet, and a light unto thy path" and we are called to be light to others. Those who serve God are walking in the light and we pray with the psalmist "Let the light of your countenance shine upon us, O Lord, and we shall be saved!" God is not only the author of light in our created world, God is Light- and thus light comes to be associated with all that is true and holy and good.

In the stories of the New Testament this language of light continues. Light and darkness, day and night are especially significant in John's Gospel, offering specific imagery every time they appear- with the Prologue, those verses so beloved of many of us, as the foundation. The incarnated Word- Jesus, who was present with God before creation- is the Light that brings life to all people: "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it." To be in light, walking in the light, is to

have invited the light of Christ to illumine the darkness of our world and of our own hearts, the very same light that has been called “good” since the dawn of creation. Night, in contrast, is the time when people stumble and fall, unable to clearly see for the overspreading darkness, when things may happen that are outside of what God wants for God’s people and thus are not held in the Light.

Today’s story from John’s Gospel is the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, who came to Jesus “by night.” Nicodemus’ background is very different from many of the persons whose paths intersect with Jesus and find themselves forever changed as a result. He is a respected and well-known holy man, influential in his own right, a Pharisee who likely had a good knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, a member of the elite governing body known as the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus appears on the surface to be someone who should be readily able to grasp the depth of Jesus’ message and indeed he calls Jesus

“Rabbi”, hailing him as a teacher who has come from God, beginning a conversation that reveals his soul-deep longing for greater understanding, both about himself and about Jesus. And yet, as Nicodemus listens with amazement to Jesus explain that he must be born from above (even though he is an old man) and born of the Spirit his response is to say: “How can these things be?” Jesus goes on to offer one of the most powerful statements in all Scripture: John 3:16, that great declaration of God’s love so freely offered for the world God created that all who believe may have the life that really is life, the gift that has already been given, the true Light that no night, no darkness will ever be able to overcome.

Nicodemus is generally criticized for asking this question- it would be easy to dismiss him, as we were tempted to do with Peter two weeks ago, for “just not getting it”, for remaining “in the dark”- especially with all

this light/dark imagery as the background. But in John's Gospel, "night" or "darkness" is not only a place where things happen that cannot bear the light- such as when Judas betrays Jesus and then goes out "and it is night"- but also when the characters have not yet even begun to absorb the gift of the Light being offered to them. In addition to Nicodemus, later there will be Peter, denying Jesus at night while warming himself at a fire- light that is right in front of him, so to speak- or when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early on that third morning "while it was still dark". When we too are in a place of darkness we cannot fully understand or embrace the Light even though we may long to with all our souls- it is the spiritual work of our lifetimes to open ourselves again and again to this Light and God's healing and Love that is so freely and everlastingly given.

We human beings have a complicated relationship with the dark. We are afraid of the things that might lurk

there that we cannot see. We long to flee from it by turning on the lights, by springing forward to get more daylight, frightened by our lack of control. We feel vulnerable in the darkness, the very core of our being exposed and uncertain, trying to fall back on what we think we know. But darkness can also be a gift, a place of invitation, a safe space to ask questions and to wonder, to rest in the presence of God free from the demands and distractions of the busier and brighter seasons of our lives. The mystics have long known that the dark night of the soul is not primarily a place of hopelessness or despair but a spiritual journey of searching for the Light as a candle in the window that lights the way back home, our longing all we truly need as we draw ever closer to the living God. Maybe we need to have known the darkness to live into the light.

I believe it is no accident that Nicodemus came searching for Jesus in the nighttime hours, although we

can never know for sure what fears of himself or others allowed him to see the night hours as safe and holy. I invite you to receive Nicodemus' "How can these things be?!" as less a head-question and more his soul's cry: "How can anything so wonderful, so light-filled and love-soaked, so freely given to all people, possibly be true? Can these truths spoken by the One we have come seeking possibly be meant for us? Of course they are so full of life and love and new ways of being that we can't take them in all at once. If we return again and again with openness and the hunger for more, willing to let what we hear amaze us and transform us, we will be pushed beyond the limits of what we think we know so that the Light can get in. Any boundaries, any containers we've put around God's gift of love will be broken so that all darkness is filled with the brightness of the true Light whose gift of eternal life is ours for always. *Amen.*

