

Sunday / December 08, 2019 2nd Sunday of Advent FIRST PARISH CHURCH

LIGHT – BEARER

I The dance between darkness and light will always remain—C. JoyBell C.

The reality of darkness and light in our lives is inescapable. It starts with human conception. Embryos form and develop in their mother’s womb. Our first introduction to darkness. Safe, warm, but dark. And then, at the moment of birth, a baby gets his, or her introduction to light. In the “olden days”, in surgical suites designed for birthing babies; overhead lighting could sometimes be as bright as a streetlight’s harsh glow. Fortunately, both in birthing suites and in our neighborhoods, lighting has improved, and has softened its glow upon humans. In a year’s time, babies are introduced to the existence of dark and light. For the first two or three years, darkness and light have nothing more to do but be the reality of learning how to live in this world. Without complex comprehension, and mature language development; light, for a child represents visual awareness, a time for eating and playing. Darkness more often is the time when sleep happens. Until a child begins to sleep through the night, sudden waking can bring a negative tone to the darkness . . . mainly because a baby’s eyesight and focus abilities are not mature and they struggle to find their humans. A vigilant parent’s touch, and an assuring tone to the baby’s ears often settles the child and lulls them back into sleep.

Child psychologists believe that a young child does not know a fear of the dark, until sometime between two and three years old. The fear of the dark evolves. It finds its beginnings in the development of a child’s imagination. This is the time of development when a child can imagine, but does not have the emotional and mental skill set to distinguish fantasy from reality. Suddenly, the unknown becomes a garden planted with potential scary things. Plus, at age two or three; a child’s brain is a literal blank slate. There are no diversions to fill the mind.

I can easily take this out of the clinical realm and tell you that a child becomes scared of the dark, when they’re the youngest child, with siblings who are 9, 7, and 5 years older. Trusting parents command their older children to babysit their youngest brother. What the parents do not command, is that these older siblings DO NOT watch scary movies, tell scary ghost stories, or hide and jump out from dark places. If you haven’t figured out yet; I am the child in this story! My sister was less involved. She was more interested in the popular TV shows, Father Knows Best, Ozzie and Harriet, and Make Room for Daddy! She stayed glued to the TV while my brothers wreaked havoc with my mental well-being! Of course, by the time my parents would return; my brothers were either in bed sleeping, or watching TV with my sister. Without proof, I had no cause to report them. The boys would deny any “foul play”, and my sister could honestly answer she knew nothing of what I was talking about!

Fortunately, my parents did not go out a lot. And they often had friends and family come to our house. So this childhood torture was not too frequent a happening. I grew up in a time when we knew less about childhood development and what might happen when a child's safety is threatened by scary actions. To my parents, it was sibling play. All I can tell you is this: In 1982, over two decades after being terrorized (my word!) by my babysitting brothers; I shrieked out loud in a movie theatre while watching the film, *Poltergeist*. It was a scene where the youngest character was already in bed, it was a stormy windy night, and lots of thunder and lightning was happening. What made me shriek was the moment in this movie when a bright strike of lightning illuminates the bedroom, and from under the bed a clown doll reaches up and grabs this little girl by the ankles, and begins to pull her out from under the covers. I can laugh now, but at that moment- all I could do was feel my brother's hands from underneath my bed grabbing at me and telling me they were monsters!

Moving from this mindset to other realities of darkness happens fast in my memories. I grew up in the country, not unlike the rural areas of Maine that I often drive. The only difference in my childhood was the closeness of the homes on our street. Growing up around homes peopled with lots of kids, we spent many long days into early evening playing games and riding our bikes. The one game that often and intentionally was played last was called, "Hide and Seek." The game is played with one person having to find the other players who've all run away and found hiding spots. When the search begins, the "loser" is the first one found! That person becomes the one who will next go out and find the hiders. We always wanted to play this last, so that the light would go away, and we would have darkness to better hide us. Ultimately, it was the sound of our parent's voices that ended playing hide and seek. Without streetlights, and without porchlights; I sometimes found that going home could be scary. Funny, being out in the dark and hiding didn't feel scary- probably because I was with my playmates. Going home alone in the dark was different.

Growth spurts, adolescence, and a senior high school social life that kept me out late and sleeping til noon all seemed to diminish any kind of fear of the dark. I formed a different relationship with darkness when I entered college. All-nighters became a reality of term paper writing. Yes. Some of that was due to a healthy social calendar, as well as a snippet of procrastination, and a strong ego that made me believe that I could wait to the last minute and get it all done in one fell swoop! Darkness was becoming a friend.

When I began teaching, I learned quickly that arising early- at least two hours before I would need to leave my apartment for school, offered me time to collect my thoughts, pray/meditate, and prepare for the day ahead. Often, especially in the winter, it was dark. I'd sit with a lamp on, or just be in my chair near the window taking in the darkness as it blended into daylight. I remain a fervent early morning person. There's a beautiful silence in that hour or so before the sun begins its rise.

A little over 30 years ago, a new understanding of darkness was added to my life experiences. I was suddenly aware of feeling crushing sadness during the wintertime. There wasn't anything in particular that I could point to when someone asked me about these feelings, but I could easily describe how my sadness felt. Unless you've never been to a dentist for x-rays; my explanation will make no sense at all. I experienced a heaviness. Heaviness in the same manner as I felt each time I went in for dental x-rays, and the dental tech would place this lead apron on the front of me. It was a protective measure. But its heaviness was uncomfortable. Once completed, I was always happy to see that lead apron go. This is what it felt like during those winter days, a heaviness over all of me.

I knew the definition of depression, but wasn't ready to allow suggestions that I might be depressed. At the encouragement of friends, I sought help. The counselor I saw was someone who was up to date on emerging conditions in the field of emotional well-being. She suggested I might be experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder. Better known by its acronym (**SAD**), Seasonal Affective Disorder was first proposed by Norman E. Rosenthal, M.D. in 1984. His 1993 book, **Winter Blues** has become the standard introduction to the subject. I honestly can't remember all that was developed as far as a treatment plan for me, and in some ways, it became an arguable diagnosis once I moved to the Southeast and began teaching school there.

However, SAD reared its ugly head one more time in my life! In 1998, we moved to Seattle, WA. Our visits had always been in July, August, or September. And truly, (for those who are familiar with the 1960s TV show, *Here Come the Brides* (starring Bobby Sherman): "The bluest skies you've ever seen are in Seattle.") The moving truck arrived with our belongings in early October that year. Settling in, unpacking boxes, and getting to know our neighborhood all happened during a period of incredible sunshine, warm to cool temperatures, and big blue skies. And then around Halloween it all changed! The blue skies went away and the clouds rolled in. The sun hid from our view. The weather turned colder, around 48 degrees. And, it was always wet! Not heavy rainfall, although that particular year we did experience a record-setting amount of rain. The wetness altered between rainfall, showers, mist, and just plain WET! It became easy to understand Seattle's nickname, the Emerald City. So much wet kept everything ever-green. I knew at what point my SAD returned. There came a point, where I wanted to stay inside all day. This wasn't challenging, because I had yet to begin my job. I looked for help through my church. I asked around for referrals for counselors. I was fortunate to learn that the pastor of the church where I attended was also a licensed therapist. His helpful "push" got me into a relationship with a local counselor therapist. It was in Seattle, in 1999 (twenty years ago) that I was introduced to light therapy!

Light therapy is a way to treat seasonal affective disorder (SAD). During light therapy, you sit or work near a light therapy box. The box gives off bright light that mimics natural outdoor light. Light therapy is thought to affect brain chemicals linked to mood and sleep, easing SAD symptoms. I can't tell you that I have an awareness of when it's working. It's not as if a switch is turned on, and the heaviness goes away. But I do know that my mood improves and my whole movement feels easier throughout the day. And, of course, on the days when you wake up to a full day of sunshine, that light box stays unplugged!

II "Light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else." - Richard Rohr

Enough about the darkness, for now. The texts we read this morning show a great emphasis on light. The pieces of text from Genesis offer God's creation of a complementary reality: Heavens and earth, light and darkness, evenings and mornings. John's gospel begins by announcing that in the beginning the light of all [hu]mankind was brought forth to shine in the darkness, and not let the darkness overcome the light. One could read John's text as agreeing with Genesis, for the light will not be overcome, but nor will the darkness be abolished. Not quite as visually, yin and yang- but clear to see there is a place for darkness and for light.

Perfect for this season, in the Christian church, that we call Advent. The origin of the word, advent, comes from the Latin: **adventus**. Translated it means, "**a coming, approach, arrival**," in Church Latin it translated to "**the coming of the Savior**," the first season of the Christian church year, leading up to Christmas and including the four preceding Sundays. Author Gayle Boss writes, "Advent . . . was the right naming of the season when light and life are fading away. . . . to know . . . that there is One who is the source of all life, . . . One who brings a new beginning." (All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings) Advent, as is true of the coming of the winter solstice, invites the darkness into our daily lives with the belief that beyond this will come the dawning of the light, a light to rejuvenate the earth's dormancy, a Light to revive our weary, faithful souls. Early humans learned to live according to the seasons. Without the help of astronomy, calendars, planting guides, or modern technology; humans waited and watched to learn the seasons and figure out the weaving of light and dark into their daily lives.

The light occurs as meaningful symbol in several major religions. In the religion of Islam, **Allah**, is the Light of the heavens and the earth. We've heard the pronunciation from Genesis as **Yahweh** calls light into being, darkness into its placement, and the first day of creation becomes a reality. And in the Hindu religion, **Diwali**, the Hindu festival of lights, lasts five days. **Diwali** symbolizes the spiritual "victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance". In the bigger picture, humans have come to look at

light as being good, and darkness as bad. Light symbolizes life, happiness, prosperity, perfection. Darkness oftentimes is associated with chaos, death and the underworld. What we finally can agree upon is this: Each day, when darkness leaves us, the light returns. In a cyclical style, then, darkness promises the continual existence of light by its regular renewal.

III “... *the light shines on inside of darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.*” (JN 1:5)

And here we are, back in conversation with the darkness! Experiences of darkness are good and necessary teachers. They’re not to be shunned, contradicted or rationalized away. Most of us will at some point in our lives, at least once – if not more times, go through a period of darkness. Fortunate are we to have someone, a professional or friend, to which we can reach out. There’s one experience darkness more often discussed in pastoral counseling or spiritual direction. St. John of the Cross called it the **Dark Night of the Soul**. St. John believed that we were led into this dark night by God, through grace, and the nature of life itself. He believed we were led here intentionally, and that we have to stay here until we have learned something essential. It is the darkness of being held closely by God without our awareness, a place where transformation happens. The dark night is an opportunity to look for and find God. It is not only in the light, that we find God. We must look in all places, seen and unseen, in darkness and in light. God separates light from darkness, but they both need each other, and they both bear the breath of God. The dark night of one’s soul may in fact be the fertile ground for new growth. Seeds must first be placed in the darkness of the ground before pushing their way to the light and growth.

When the lights go out, we simply lose our bearings. We find ourselves alone in the universe, released and ill-equipped. Lightlessness leaves us no internal compass by which to set our steps. The darkness of the soul offers no less spiritually challenging conditions. We talk a lot about having faith during times of this darkness, but humans cannot tolerate having faith (without seeing). It’s the light we yearn for, not the shadow, and never unanswered questions. There’s a place of depth in the ocean where there is little to no light. Known as the **aphotic** zone, it’s defined as the depths beyond which less than 1% of sunlight penetrates. In our souls, our aphotic is the womb of our despair and hopelessness. Where am I going? the soul wants to know. When will this be over? The mind wants to know. How can I get out of this sightless place I’m in? the heart demands. St. John of the Cross, and many Christian mystics have witnessed to this truth: Darkness will never have the last word!

There is a light in us that only darkness itself can illuminate. At the core of this darkness is the light of surrender. The surrendering to our human need to control, to accept there is a God, and that we are not it! Life isn't about us; we are about the means for creating life. We can arrive at this awareness, learn to let go of the need to control, and renew a meaning and purpose for life. This new meaning and purpose offer us the light we need to be of help to others, especially those whose journey into their own dark night is just beginning. I was asked to read this book in seminary, which was written to help those in the caring ministry offer better care for those in need. Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen, writes in his book **The Wounded Healer**, “. . . *ministers are called to recognize the sufferings of their time in their own hearts and make that recognition the starting point of their service. . . . ministers must be willing to go beyond their professional role and leave themselves open as fellow human beings with the same wounds and suffering—in the image of Christ. In other words, we heal from our own wounds.*”

Only our own taste of darkness qualifies us to be an illuminating part of the human journey. Without that, we are only words. False witnesses to the truth of what it means to be pressed to the ground and rise again. The light we take on in the darkness is an awareness that however bleak the place of darkness was for us, we did not perish. We know now that life begins on the other side of the darkness. Life goes on. Differently, but on. Having sunk to the depths of darkness, and survived; we rise to a new light confident that what will be, will be enough for us. When we have lost ourselves in the darkness, and have endured to rise again; we become more compassionate and loving human beings. For we no longer rely on our own light, but upon the Light of the world living within us.

The darkness of the world will never totally go away. But as we hear in John's gospel, “. . . *the light shines on inside of darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.*” (1:5)

“Christian wisdom names the darkness as darkness and the Light as light and helps us learn how to live and work in the Light so that the darkness does not overcome us. If we have a pie-in-the-sky, everything is beautiful attitude, we are going to be trapped by the darkness because we don't see clearly enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. Equally, if we can only see the darkness and forget the more foundational Light, we will be destroyed by our own negativity and intolerance, or we will naively think we are *completely apart and beyond the darkness.*”

Instead, *we must wait and work with hope inside of the darkness*, even our own—while never doubting the light that God always is, and that we are too. That is the narrow birth canal of God into the world—*through* the darkness and into an ever-greater Light. It seems we must all let go of our false innocence to find that “*God alone is good*” (Mark 10:18).” It seems we all must be bearers of that Light, for each other! Adapted from Richard Rohr, [Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr: Daily Meditations for Advent](#) (Franciscan Media: 2008), 22-24.