

BLAINE MEMORIAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
LENTEN SERIES 2016

FEARLESS: The Courage to Question

Worship Service • February 21, 2016

Beauty of Darkness

• Introduction: Food for Thought •

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

- Lao Tzu

Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar....

... Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking

- Antonio Machado

It's not where you start – it's where you finish that counts.

- Zig Ziglar

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings.

- Jiddu Krishnamurti

After one or the other of my parents had kissed me good night and turned off the light by my bed...then all the loose darkness in the room started to collect in the closet and under the bed, pulling itself together with such magnetic malevolence that I could not keep my mind away from it...I had no way of knowing that the darkness was as much inside me as it was outside me, or that I had any power to affect its hold on me...The only strategy I had ever been taught for dealing with my fear of the dark was to turn on the lights and yell for help

- Barbara Brown Taylor

I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

- Isaiah 45:3

• The Word of God •

Read with a vulnerable heart. Expect to be blessed in the reading. Read as one awake, one waiting for the Beloved. Read with reverence.

- Macrina Wiederkehr

Lectio (READ): *On the first reading, simply open yourself to the presence of God. Read the passage slowly and prayerfully, allowing short pauses between sentences.*

Meditatio (REFLECT): *On the second prayerful reading of the passage, listen for a particular word or a phrase through which God wants to speak to you. You will notice your attention being drawn to something (or if this doesn't happen, just choose a word). Once you have "received" the word or phrase, begin to silently meditate on that.*

Oratio (RESPOND): *On the third prayerful reading of the passage, listen now for God's invitation, and respond from your heart.*

Contemplatio (REST): *The focus of the fourth prayerful reading of the passage is to simply rest now in the love that God has for you.*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' ... 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

~ John 3: 1-8, 16-17

• Reflection Questions from Sermon •

1. When you hear the word “night” or think of darkness, what images, feelings, or thoughts come to your mind? Are they positive or negative? How do you think your upbringing affects your response to the idea of darkness?
2. Can you remember a time when you heard the word “dark” used positively? If not, why might this be? If so, explain how it was used and your reaction to it?
3. Barbara Brown Taylor says the opposition of dark and light in Christian tradition sets up a harmful dichotomy between these two spheres of human experience. How true do you think this is? Have you seen this dichotomy at work in your own faith tradition?
4. When you awake at night with things on your mind, what do you do? Do you attempt to fall back to sleep as soon as you can, or do you stay with the unsettling thoughts for a while? In either case, what is your motivation for doing so?
5. What is your response to the idea that people need darkness as much as light to learn what they need to know about life? Can you describe a time when you learned something in darkness that you could not have learned in light?
6. Jesus compares the action of the Holy Spirit with the wind. What does this comparison reveal about the action of the Spirit of God in your life? Have you already had an experience that has given you the impression of being born again?
7. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Has this truth penetrated the depths of your heart, of your conscience?

• Notes from the Sermon - Rev. Shalom Agtarap •

please read this section after hearing today's sermon

So many images from art, movies, even holy texts speak about darkness as a negative event.

Darkness can be physical reality but it often brings on confusion and disorientation. Barbara Brown Taylor says "darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me."

Do we, like Barbara Brown Taylor, learn to fear the dark, and surround ourselves with self-help resources that sometimes distract us from deeper darkness?

Nicodemus is a religious authority who carries great questions. How do we view the practice of questioning? Do we welcome it as a source of inquiry and exploration? Does it symbolize weakness or strength? Often we fail to ask questions that actually keep us from deeper faith because we fear we will be judged for not already knowing the answers.

Jesus invites us to come with questions, even those of us who are lifelong practitioners of faith! There is a wide welcome extended to all who want to draw near to the Source of Light and Love.

Fear and doubt creep in, often in times of great challenge and can feel hopeless. But the same reminder uttered to Nicodemus in the dark night is also uttered to us, "God so loved the world, that he gave his son, his one and only son."

Nicodemus shows up again at the end of the gospel, in John 19:39, offering myrrh and aloes for the broken body of Jesus. We can imagine that what began as questions asked under the cover of darkness has blossomed and transformed Nicodemus' life so much that he was present at the burial of Jesus, in the brightness of day.