

WGUMC November 27, 2016
"The Gift of Darkness"

Matthew 4:12-17

O Trinity

beyond essence and
beyond divinity and
beyond goodness
guide of Christians in divine wisdom,
direct us toward mysticism's heights
beyond unknowing
beyond light
beyond limit
there where the unmixed and
unfettered and
unchangeable
mysteries of theology
in the dazzling dark of the welcoming silence
lie hidden, in the intensity of their darkness
all brilliance outshining,
our intellects, blinded—overwhelming,
with the intangible and
with the invisible and
with the illimitable.

Such is my prayer....

[Psuedo-Dionysius, *The Divine Dark*]

These are the words of a late 5th century mystic in a text called "The Divine Dark." That's a fitting place to begin the season of Advent. There is good reason that the Church celebrates the birth of Christ in the darkest time of the year.

There are, in fact, a couple of theories for the date of Christmas. One says that church leaders simply coopted one or more ancient pagan rites. There was the Roman festival of Saturnalia that involved a tradition of gift giving. And there was the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, or the birthday of the unconquered Sun. The latter festival took place just after the Winter Solstice, when the sun was reborn, so to speak, and the days began to lengthen again.

A second theory to explain the date of Christmas is based on the early belief that Jesus was conceived and crucified on the same day. The gospels connect his death to Passover which some early Christians calculated to be March 25th. Add nine months and you have a birthday of December 25th.

So we have good enough historical reasons for celebrating Christmas in the darkness of winter. But I believe we have even better theological reasons for doing so. What I want to argue today is that we need darkness in order to understand

Christmas. I want to try to convince you that if we never experience darkness, we will never be able to see the one true light.

When you think about it, Jesus did not come to preach to people who lived in the light, but people who lived in darkness. That's what Matthew's Gospel tells us: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

Our problem is that we want to live in the light at all times and avoid the darkness at all costs. We humans are afraid of the dark. That's because demons haunt and predators prowl and thieves steal at night. So we came up with fire and then electricity so that we could light up the night and not have to deal with the dark. Now our cities are so bright, we can't see the stars.

And it isn't just physical darkness that we are afraid of. In the church, we have long waged a war against spiritual

darkness, as well. But what happens to us if we hide from our inner darkness? What happens when we try to cultivate what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "full solar spirituality"? [interview with Time Magazine,] When we make every effort to keep on the sunny side of life, we will never know what's in the dark corners of our souls because we never go there.

Instead, we get ourselves a spiritual sun lamp. We make sure we smile at church and sing the right songs and believe the right things and always think positive thoughts, and everything will be just fine. Until it isn't, until something happens to us, something that wasn't in our plan, something that we can't smile about or think positively about, and our sunny faith flies south. Then we're really in trouble, because there is so much artificial light in our lives, that we can't see the light of our lives.

The season of Advent is full of artificial light. In Willow Glen, we light up our houses to pretty up the dark. And we do

the same for our spirits. But we aren't fooling ourselves.

Parties and presents are not going to solve any problems for us.

They won't change the situation. They won't heal any wounds

or bring us any more love. These things cannot happen in

artificial light. So this year, I invite you to sit in the darkness

and be patient with it, for if you read your Bible, you'll learn

that the most amazing things happen in the darkness.

God created the heavens and the earth when "darkness covered the face of the deep." [Gen 1:2] Jacob wrestled with God in the darkness. [Gen 32:22-32] When God gave the law on Sinai, "the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was." [Ex 20:21] King Solomon, dedicating the temple, proclaimed, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." [I Kings 8:12] And God says to King Cyrus of Persia, "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]

There are many treasures of darkness, if we will only trust God to go there with us. The magi would never have found Jesus if they had not made friends with the night and discovered the star. The crucifixion would never have occurred if Jesus hadn't prayed that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. The work of the cross was done when "darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon." [Mark 15:33] And the morning of the resurrection dawned after Jesus was three days dead in the darkness of the tomb.

So don't be afraid to go into that darkness that is in you and ask it what it can teach you. What is that fear, that uncertainty, that pain that you don't want to feel this season? Is it some big mistake, some secret sin, some emotional hurt, some nagging regret, some cruel disappointment, some unresolved grief, some lingering doubt, some feeling of

uselessness or spiritual emptiness? Whatever it is, naming it and claiming is the precondition for receiving the joy, the assurance and the promise that God is waiting so patiently to give you. Sitting with your darkness won't kill you—I promise—and it can save you. No artificial light can penetrate it. Only Christ's light can shine in that darkness and not be overcome by it. [John 1:5] Just as the astronomers need deep darkness in order to see the stars, so we need our own darkness in order to see our Savior.

Poets say it better than I can, so I'll end here with a poem by David Whyte, called "Sweet Darkness." It is my prayer for you.

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.
When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.
Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.
There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your home
tonight.
The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.
You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.
Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.
Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn
anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.

This Christmas, may the darkness help you to see the Christ
who is just waiting to bring you alive. Amen.