

Learning from the Dark
Meditation from John 9:1-41
March 26, 2017
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Leah Fowler

Last Monday, we celebrated the Spring Equinox. My body always breathes a sigh of relief at the Spring Equinox, because I know the daytime light tips over to be greater than the nighttime dark. I see snow melting, and various animals being social and exploratory. On our walk home from her school the other day, my daughter and I saw 7 turkeys gathered on the yard right next to Karen and Jack Peters' home! We can see the buds forming on the trees, and tulip leaves poking up with even more bold optimism than they had when they emerged before the snowstorm two weeks ago. The early signs of spring, usually appearing in the middle of the Lenten journey, point us towards the hope of Easter and the light it brings.

What are your favorite revelations as the winter yields to spring? Close your eyes and picture your favorite sign in nature of the Spring.

Now considering that the nights are getting shorter, and the days are getting longer, think of what we can enjoy with all that sunlight.

Here are some of my favorite visions of light that I want to share with you to enjoy. You can close your eyes and imagine them, or imagine some of your own favorite ways that light plays in your imagination:

A dog finding a triangle of sunshine in the living room and, after scratching it out to spread it larger, walking in a circle three times and lying down in it.

Riding as a passenger in a car on a bright sunny day, without your sunglasses, and closing your eyes but watching, with your eyes closed, the

red, pink and black of the sun's light shining through tree branches, through your eyelids

A turtle, sitting high on a log jutting out of the creek at Overpeck Park, warming its shell in the sunlight until dry.

The light on a typically silent teenager's face when telling you something that is important or exciting to her, to him.

The warmth and light of a campfire that makes your face flush with heat, while the side of your body not facing the fire feels the chill of the dark.

The light on bright white teeth when a normally shy person breaks into a big, uninhibited smile.

How does the light play on your imagination right now? Are you seeing your own favorite visions?

The John passage is also concerned with the movement from darkness into light.

John's gospel has an interplay between light and darkness throughout.

We start the gospel with John's words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Nicodemus, whose story we heard in John 2 weeks ago, approached Jesus in the dark nighttime, and his questioning of Jesus began as suspicious and challenging. Contrast him with the Samaritan woman who

encountered Jesus at the well, who came at noon, the time of the day when the light shines brightest. She accepted the living water Jesus had to offer with an eager thirst.

While today's passage does not specifically mention light and darkness, we can see that Jesus makes a blind man see, and then points out that the truly blind people are those who cannot "see" that Jesus is from God: they focus instead on the fact that he healed on the Sabbath; they see the blind man as a sinner and cannot conceive to a man from God healing a sinner; and they see Jesus challenging the status of those who call themselves disciples of Moses. Jesus in the end points out the trouble of the ones who can indeed see, but are the true blind ones in the dark.

Now, I want to make note of some assumptions implicit in John's gospel that I can't easily preach my way out of. John often makes Jesus and his teachings stand in contrast to the Judaism of the time. In this passage, the Pharisees and their strict interpretation of the Jewish law become the bullies. However, other gospels treat Jesus more as a fulfillment of the Jewish teachings-- as he said in Matthew's gospel (5:17), "I come not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it." Amy-Jill Levine, who is a New Testament Scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School and a Jew, said that often the Judaism represented in John is more a caricature of where the faith had evolved in the first century rather than an accurate depiction in it. The Pharisees in particular always seem to show up when Jesus has an important point to make. Similarly, while the disciples suppose that the blind man was made blind due to his own sin or that of his parents, Jesus says that neither sinned; "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." So at first, this man seems to be a prop onto which Jesus can work his miracles rather than someone who shows true agency in what is about to happen. I admit I prefer the healing story in Mark 10, in which Jesus approaches Bartimaeus, who is also blind, and asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" instead of looking at him and assuming that blindness is the thing he wants transformed.

In John, you see a dualism that is often stark: light over darkness; able-bodied over disabled; Jesus-follower vs. Jew, spirit vs. flesh. It may be hard to see anything wrong with this ordering, because we still privilege this hierarchy in today's culture and add our own bits: citizen over undocumented, light skinned over brown or black skin, college-educated over blue-collar worker. In Dr. Angie Chung's book *Saving Face*, we see the persistent and determined work ethic and educational values many American children of Asian immigrants have, because they want to rise above the struggles and sometimes failures that their parents experienced to hopefully achieve the American Dream. In pursuit of the so-called American Dream, children of immigrants sort through what of their parents' culture they will keep, and what they will leave behind. Sometimes, there is an internal struggle as a person chooses what traits they will privilege, and what gets lost.

Writer Og Mandino once said, "I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness because it shows me the stars." As much as I love spring, and am so glad that we can enjoy the lengthening of days, I am going to suggest that we spend a little more time in the dark places while it is still Lent. Let's explore their contours. As much as Lent is a gift of our devotion and reflection in relationship with God, it is also God's gift to us. As we probe our own darkness, we may be surprised at what we find and want to share with God.

I remember as a teenager going to church camp. We always had evening vespers at sunset at the lakeside, so that by the time worship was over, we had to walk a half-mile trail back to the campsite. After our last song was sung and we left the warmth of the fire, campers' flashlights would click on. I always liked to hang back a little to find my way back in the dark. There was something about not relying on my eyesight, as if I could listen for the tree branches bending into my path and smell the vegetation that threatened to trip me or give me poison ivy. That darkness blocking my

vision ultimately called me to rely on God. But also on those walks I could somehow be more honest with God about my longings and my fears than I could in the daytime, when it seemed everything was simply okay.

In Japan, the Spring Equinox is a holiday called Shunbun no Hi. As an outsider, to me it seems ironic that at a point when you see the cherry blossoms start to bloom, on this Japanese holiday people also go to visit the graves of their ancestors. But I think that Christians also deal with this dance between life and death, light and darkness, vision and blindness during Lent.

I invite you to close your eyes and welcome the darkness. Imagine a dark peace that comes when you finally cut off the TV, put away your cell phone, close the computer, and encounter the night unmediated. Some of us find these electronics more comfortable than the night because the noise and artificial light distract us from our fears, our loneliness, and our burdens. But today we will share them with God, remembering from Psalm 23 “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Relax into darkness. Can you sense where you are? Are you inside or outside? Are you alone, or is someone with you? Notice whether you have any fear of the darkness. Does the darkness insulate you like a blanket, or does it leave you exposed to things that see better in the dark than you? Find your footing in whatever dark place you are in. Decide which sense you will rely on more, knowing you cannot see.

Now consider what it will mean to rely on God. In this place of vulnerability, what do you want to make sure that God knows?

What longing do you want to seek before God? Picture that need waiting for you as a gift from God. Perhaps it is forgiveness. Perhaps it is acceptance, validation, respect. Maybe it is connection. Maybe it is love.

It is waiting as a gift for you, but in order to reach for it, you must unclench your fist. You realize you are holding on tightly to something. For the Pharisees, it was the Law. They could just not let it go even though in Jesus, God was standing right in front of them. You know by now what you want to receive. So you open your fists and open your arms. What have you released?

As you open again to the day and to the light, carry that gift with you which you found in the dark. And if you need to go back into the darkness again, know that you can, and that Jesus will meet you there, helping you to find that God goes where you go. Amen.