

“Finding Our Way in the Dark”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

March 1, 2020

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Psalm 32

Matthew 4:1-11

As we journey with Jesus into Lent, we spend 40 days in spiritual reflection, preparation, penitence and prayer-- just like he spent 40 days in the wilderness. You will notice that my robe has changed from white to black, as a sign of the season of spiritual reflection. This year, we are using the theme of Darkness to explore Lent.

But ever since Christmas, we have been awash in the light. We journeyed with the maji who followed that bright star to Bethlehem. There, we celebrated the Christ child, proclaiming “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light!” More recently, we travelled up the mountain with Peter, James, John as they followed Jesus there, and witnessed his clothes become a dazzling white, and saw him surrounded by a cloud of light. Like Peter, who told Jesus that he would make dwellings there on the mountain, places of safety and permanence surrounded by all that light, it would be understandable if we wanted to just stay in that season of light forever.

In fact, some do. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the attraction of what she calls “Full Solar Spirituality,” which “focuses on staying in the light of God around the clock, both by absorbing and reflecting the sunny side of faith.” In Full Solar Spirituality, God always answers prayers. Christians always keep a positive attitude. Our faith is always unshakeable. Our relationships are unblemished. If you are committed to Full Solar Spirituality, then the concept of “darkness” represents sin, evil, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death.

Of course, our comfort with light comes from obvious reasons: Mostly, we can see where we are going when it is light outside. We feel safer when it is light outside-- and I have to admit, these days I have had to give myself a rule, that I only read the news during daylight. At night, my imagination goes wild, and there can be no end to my ruminations over things I do not have control over. Before there was household electricity, nighttime light usually meant fire, which also meant warmth and often meant food too.

But Full Solar Spirituality is not a very honest spirituality, and it does not take into account how much time we actually spend in the dark. With so much interest in the light, we forget how much we really need darkness. It is in the dark that we get our sleep and our bodies and our minds are restored. It is in the dark that lovers reach for one another, finding connection and joy. In darkness we often find quiet, rather than the oppressing demands to produce, produce, produce. In the darkness of a womb, a baby is formed, and stays to receive nurture and strength until being pushed into the world. Even when we get depressed, and reach a kind of emotional darkness, it can be a sign that shows us we need to pay attention to our lives. If we take that opportunity, we may discover depression teaching us that we need to slow down and practice self-care. We may discover that a big change in life is needed. We may not learn anything from depression, except how to simply be-- for even the daily act of existence can feel like a struggle during the darkness of depression. But for those who survive depression, maybe you have done so because you have had good counseling and medications if you need it, but there is something more: maybe you have survived depression because you have learned how to look at your darkness and dwell with it, even greeting it as a companion, knowing that it might dwell in you, but it does not have to become your God.

My daughter recently asked me, "Mama, if I have bad thoughts in my mind, is that wrong?" My first instinct was to demand her to tell me what she was thinking and analyze it. But instead, something told me to take a deep breath and let her bad thoughts be private, as long as she wanted them to be. I asked her instead, "What do you think would happen if I told you, 'Never, whatever you do, think bad thoughts in your mind?'" She replied, "I would think about those things all the time."

Jesus made a pilgrimage into the wilderness, for 40 days and nights, at the start of his ministry, and there he confronted all kinds of darkness. He whatever "bad" thoughts his mind would allow. Scripture says these came out through the character of Satan. I am wary of putting a name to these thoughts that dwell within us, because by naming them as someone else, we externalize them and forget how deeply they are actually part of us.

Jesus was struggling with more than temptation to defeat hunger, by turning stones into bread; defeat death by throwing himself off a cliff and letting the angels catch him; and defeat obscurity by being made king whom all the nations will follow. **Jesus was struggling with the temptation not to be human.** All these challenges presented to Jesus were asking Jesus to rely on his divinity, rather than his humanity. But if Jesus was to be fully God, fully human, he had to fully experience the contours of human longing, human suffering, and human mortality.

In being tempted to turn stones into bread, Jesus meets the darkness of unmet desire-- hunger. In being tempted to throw himself off a cliff so that the angels catch him, Jesus meets the darkness of vulnerability. In being tempted to have all the nations bow to him, Jesus meets the darkness of insignificance. We all struggle with these experiences that are core to what it means to be human.

I am not going to lie to you. I am from the South, so I know how to shop for survival. Growing up in Atlanta, every time the weather forecaster predicted even a dusting of snow, the grocery stores would sell out of milk, bread, and eggs. So when the CDC had announced the possibilities of life disruptions as we wait and see what COVID-19 would do, I knew what I would do. On Friday, I clenched my hands around the shopping cart-- which had been freshly sanitized-- as I began a Costco run. I bought a "few" items: food staples, like beans, pasta and peanut butter; cleaning supplies, toilet paper, tissues, and basic medications. Except, it was the Costco size of all these things, and therefore it was far more than we need, even if we couldn't shop for weeks. Still, my hoarding gave me a sense of safety and control. On my way out, I announced to the employee checking receipts, "I bought this much stuff so that I don't ever have to come here again." He laughed and replied, "See you in two weeks!"

The truth is, all that food doesn't actually make me safe. Maryellen Neu, a nurse in a NYC hospital and a part of the Public Health Board for Leonia, told me last week it's good to practice safe hygiene, but it's still the plain old flu that we should be worried about. I was reminded on Wednesday night, like many of you who attended Ash Wednesday service, that I am made from dust, and it is to dust I will return. My Costco card won't help me cheat death. In the end, none of us has any control over whether we die; we might make healthy and wise choices that will add to our years, but in the end, we are all in the same, mortal predicament. I am trying to get to the place where that knowledge is freeing-- look, I don't have to be in control!-- but I am not there yet, I admit. I have read that in older age, many people gain a sense of deeper peace about dying, and I hope that will be true for me; it seems only fair, right?

In the meantime, I have a pantry full of food and the false sense of security it gives me. And, I recognize what a privilege it is to be able to shop for a cart full of groceries at Costco. What about the people who are *actually* vulnerable, right now? I noticed that hand sanitizer on Amazon is selling for \$50, which is truly ridiculous-- hand washing works just fine. If people are focused on hoarding things for themselves and their

families, who is thinking about the people who actually don't have food *right now*? I talked it over with Chris and decided that we should give a portion of the food I bought to The Center for Food Action and Loaves and Fishes. After all, what kind of life is worth living if we forget how to share; what do our lives mean if we forget our sense of duty and compassion towards those who are hurting more than we are? If we are in danger of losing anything in these times, I think that would be our biggest loss.

I stayed a night with my brother the week before last, on my way to a spiritual retreat with my best friends from seminary. We spent the afternoon catching up, and then he heard his girlfriend pull up into the driveway. "Oh, do you want to participate in *the ritual*? I always hide when she comes home from work. She has to find me." And so I crawled underneath a blanket on the sofa while my brother crouched behind the kitchen counter. "Oh, and here!" he announced as he tossed me three soft, woolen snowballs-- he uses reusable wool balls instead of dryer sheets-- "It's best if you throw things at her when she finds you."

Of course, his girlfriend Shea took forever in the driveway. The waiting was killing me. And I couldn't help but remember playing hide and go seek with my brother when he was little-- he's 7 years younger than me, so it took him a while before he had any game. "I'm in the hall closet!" he would announce as I approached. This memory made me giggle, and then I couldn't stop giggling, and when Shea finally did open the door she saw a shuddering blanket on the sofa with, what she thought, were sobs coming out of it. She wasn't sure what to do I later learned, until I popped out of the blanket because I couldn't keep from laughing, and started throwing woolen snowballs at her, while my brother joined the ambush. I guess I'm the one who has no game now.

My playful little brother hasn't forgotten the joy of being found. I'm glad he's been found by someone to love and share his home with. "You are a hiding place for me," the Psalmist told God. What if, instead of feeling like we need to hide *from* God, we felt secure hiding *in* God? I don't mean that we should use God to hide from the world. I don't think God would find much satisfaction in that. But if we could gather our vulnerabilities and bring them before God, showing to God all our dark and shadowy corners, I suspect that what feels heavy and impossible to us feels like puffs of woolen snowballs to God.

Sometimes, like Jesus, we also struggle with the temptation not to be human-- which is a funny thing, because we were never made to be gods. Still, we worry so much about what others think; we fear failure so much that we can't risk glory. The humility of this season of penitence teaches us that it is okay to be human. It is okay to make mistakes.

It is okay to admit we have sinned. We aren't perfect. And that is not what God demands of us. God demands-- no, God desires-- our love. God desires our return, and even offers a hiding place for us, where we can bring our shadows and darkness which doesn't even seem dark to God.