

Presbyterian Church in Leonia (NJ)
3rd Sunday in Lent
3/23/25

Texts: Genesis 1:1–5 and Isaiah 45:3–7
Sermon Title: “Are You Afraid of the Dark?”
Preacher: The Rev. Heather Brannon

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Sermon

Here we are, this third Sunday of Lent, venturing closer to Holy Week with both fear and excitement, with grief and renewed hope, with sadness and joyful anticipation for what’s to come.

But before we fast forward to Holy Week, I always find that Lent is a great time to press the reset button, to let go of the things that burden us, to make positive changes. In a nutshell, Lent is all about self-reflection.

Lent is a 40 day period that’s designed to help us focus on growing our faith. The 40 days of Lent are modeled after Jesus’ time in the wilderness when he was tested by temptations in a world full of uncertainty and darkness. Yet, he found creative and healthy ways to navigate this season of his life.

Just like Jesus, we all go through challenging, dark times in life. The question is: *How do we handle the darkness as Christians? Do we resist it, embrace it, or a little of both?*

My sermons for the next two weeks will focus on learning how to walk in the dark, the place where we grow the most. Let’s see what God has to teach us in the dark that we wouldn’t otherwise learn in the light. We need darkness as much as we need light.¹

So here’s my first question (raise your hand): *Who’s afraid of the dark?*

Remember when we were kids and our parents would shout outside to us, “*Come inside now, it’s getting dark!*” The last thing they wanted was us wandering in the night.

I think for most adults, we tolerate the dark, pretend to be comfortable with it, but in reality, it scares us.

It’s the unknown and it feels dangerous. You don’t know what’s out there. You don’t know which direction to go. You feel stuck.

So, you start searching for a flashlight, for solutions, for anything that will turn the darkness into light. That’s a typical human reaction to uncertainty, not only to physical darkness like nighttime, but also to dark periods of our lives.

But, as people of faith, we’re apparently supposed to embrace darkness. As the prophet Isaiah just told us, “*God will give us the treasures of darkness in secret places so that we may know God.*”

In other words, we need darkness so that we can know God. But, darkness doesn’t always need to be associated with bad things.

¹ Sermon series, “Learning to Walk in the Dark,” inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor’s book (2014).

As Christians, we live tend to live with “full solar spirituality,” by ignoring the darkness and associating it with things like sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, evil, and death. We equate struggling with a lack of faith. After all, Christians are supposed to be a beacon of light.

But the reality is, we all navigate darkness over and over again. So, rather than resist it, let’s embrace it and see this as the gift of lunar spirituality, a faith in which divine light waxes and wanes with the season.

For example, think about the moon: one night, it’s full and bright. Other nights, it’s a sliver of light. The light of the moon fluctuates in the dark, just like it does in our own lives.

So, instead of thinking there’s something wrong with us when we’re stuck in the darkness of life, let’s see what life would be like with God if we trusted this rhythm instead of opposing it.

Let’s figure out what we’re truly afraid of and how much we’re missing out on when we reach for the lights.

The good news is that even when the light fades and darkness falls, as it does every single day, God doesn’t turn the world over to some evil deity.

And, even when we can’t see where we’re going and no one answers when we call out, this doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re alone. There’s a divine presence that transcends all of our perceptions of the darkness, dismissing the idea that darkness is a wrecking ball to our delicate lives.

Remember: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day because God is here with us through one another in both the light and darkness of life.

Now, before we start learning how to walk in the dark together, let’s spend time exploring darkness in the Bible, beginning with the first creation story in Genesis.

God first created the heavens and the earth, but the earth was covered in complete darkness. But, darkness was not created. It was already there. What exactly darkness is or how it got there, we’ll never know.

God decided to create light and separate it from the darkness, calling the light “day” and the darkness “night.”

The point is that darkness came first; light came second. But, this isn’t a story about opposition. Darkness is not equated with evil nor is light associated with good things. They exist in the world in a complementary way. We need both of them.

Now consider our text this morning from the prophet Isaiah. We’re met with the reality that God creates both the light and the darkness, both weal and woe, which is a bit hard to stomach.

It makes me wonder: *How could a God of love and justice not only allow affliction and oppression, but creates it?!* That’s not very comforting!

But, Isaiah takes the dark and light connotations to a new level, not to terrorize us, but to affirm that God is present in the darkness, even when the way forward isn’t clear.

God doesn’t create injustice. Humans do a good job of that all by themselves. What God does affirm is that God will be with us in those dark times, when our suffering becomes too much to bear.

We know this because of this particular passage from Isaiah, which was written during the Babylonian Exile, at a time when Judah was in war torn ruins. Even the Temple in Jerusalem, the greatest place of worship, was destroyed. God’s people were now living in exile under Babylonian conquerors.

The Israelites were lost and in a dark place. They were experiencing national humiliation because God didn’t stop this defeat. They were disappointed and started to question their faith.

They started to wonder: *How could God, who stands with the oppressed, who protects the weak and the poor and the vulnerable, allow us to end up suffering in a foreign land?*

It was a complicated time in history. The darkness threatened to overcome the light.

But, this was a good lesson for them regarding God's expectations for all of us. The truth is, no community can be restored if the forces that threaten peace and harmony are not subdued. We, as humans, have been given a gift from God, the gift of agency, to stop evil in its tracks.

Isaiah's prophetic word here is one of hope in the darkness, a word proclaimed to a community questioning whether there was a future to live for, a message that is just as relevant back in the sixth century BCE as it is for us today.

As wave after wave of violence passed over cities devastated by war, faithful people asked whether God had forsaken them, whether the forces of evil had assumed control of their lives.

How easy it is in such a situation to give up hope. It's despair that is the enemy that can destroy us.

It's just like any of us who have been through dark periods in our own lives. How easy it would be to give into despair after a loved one dies unexpectedly or we get fired from our job.

How easy it would be to give into despair when grief saturates our existence during a divorce or chronic illnesses or mental health struggles.

How easy it would be to give into despair right now when our current society threatens survival:

Racism and gun violence and homophobia and misogyny and white supremacy and oppressive forces threatening the marginalized at every turn.

Now, I'm not dismissing how devastating darkness can be. It can leave a lifelong imprint on us, even becoming a source of trauma.

Yet, in the midst of darkness, it's nothing short of miraculous to witness people and communities of hope in a dark situation, people just like you, who refused to let despair have the final word.

The difference between those who give up hope and those who persevere is that the faithful decided to not be afraid of the dark.

They have a hope based on trust in God's final victory of justice over evil that preserves the possibility of transformation in this broken, dark world.

The Israelites didn't give up hope in exile, just like Jesus didn't give up hope during his 40 days in the wilderness and his controversial ministry. Jesus didn't even give up hope on the cross.

Friends, sometimes you have to walk through the darkness to get to the light, to get from the crucifixion to the resurrection.

Yes, it's still hard to fathom that a God of love and justice not only allows woe, but creates it. It would be way easier to claim that some other sinister power created evil.

But, the severe reality is that God created both evil and good and also the human ability for us to manage them.

Part of sustaining hope in the darkness is that we have an unswerving conviction that God's final plan is light and hope, justice and mercy. There may be evil in this world, but it doesn't need to be the root of our actions. Nor does despair need to have the final word.

This firm belief in God's good intentions grounds us, and empowers us to stop the human evils that afflict our community because God gave us the agency to do something about injustice.

Part of God's plan in this broken world, in our divisive society, is to restore justice. But, it must begin with us, transforming evil into love, one small action at a time.

Taking this a step further, this belief also allows us to recognize hope in the darkness that others can't see. And, maybe, as a people of hope, we can inspire others who have lost hope, to join us, too.

Consider Nelson Mandela, who saw rays of light, even in his jailcell. He didn't succumb to despair or the prevailing doubts that apartheid could be broken.

His faith was grounded in this belief that God stood for love and justice. He believed that when the time of deliverance arrived, a seemingly hopeless situation would be transformed into a time of reform and reconciliation that would astonish the world.

This is the faith that Isaiah encourages us to have, a faith that equips us to navigate present crises with hope, a faith that is neither cynical nor utopian, a realistic faith that empowers us to stop evil and bring more love into this world,

a faith that holds people accountable for their actions and expects us to contribute to God's greater plan for the world.

But above all, this faith, our faith, is a faith that isn't perfect or poly-anna-ish.

It's a faith that is hopeful in dark times, because deep down inside, we trust that God walks with us through our relationships with one other, that God will never forsake us, no matter how dark things might seem, that God loves us and won't abandon us.

This faith gives us a path through the darkness, to move forward one step at a time, no matter what difficult situations we may find ourselves in.

Whether its personal challenges or this time of unsettling transition here in the life of your church without a pastor or current events that are devastating our community, we, as God's people, must cling onto our faith.

We cling onto our faith and act with courage in dark times because we are secure in God's love for us.²

The truth is, we need darkness as much as we need light. We find God not only in the light, but also in the wilderness of our lives, where we grow closer to God and one another. When the darkness passes, all is transformed.

As I return to my original question, "*Who's afraid of the dark?*" remember this: the courage to walk in the dark is learning how to manage our fears and it must be practiced. Darkness is scary, but rarely dangerous.

So, instead of coming inside the house when it gets dark out, remember God's invitation: "*Go outside, it's getting dark.*" May it be so. Amen and amen.

² Commentary taken from Interpretation, "Isaiah 40-66," Paul D. Hanson (1995).