
The Tyranny of Light

Psalm 13; Genesis 22:1–14

We are now at maximum light. Just this week, we observed the longest day of the year, the Summer solstice. The sun will make its long trek across the sky and finally set tonight at around 8:30pm, not too long before bedtime for some of you. Compare that to a December sunset we'll get later this year, nearly four hours earlier, at 4:30pm. These days, we are operating at maximum light.

For the most part, we are ok with this. We enjoy the extended warm evenings which allow us longer time to sit on the porch and sip a glass of wine, more time to play in the pool, a longer afternoon for children to expend their Summer break energies out in the neighborhood. We look forward to these days of extended light.

The psalmist says of God: "Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day." The other day I had a Psalm 139 moment. I was watching the World Cup soccer match between Mexico and South Korea with some neighbors at a Mexican restaurant near Times Square. A match that Mexico won. And when the game ended around 11pm or so, we headed into Times Square to celebrate with all the other fans who had flooded into the area. Against my better judgement, we ended up staying well past midnight. Not so easy anymore at my age. There were hundreds of people gathered in that tightly-packed space. Many crowded into one corner of the square, jumping, waving flags, chanting, and tossing humans into the air. Some had formed a large circle and were playing a fierce game of keep-away with a soccer ball. Others surrounded these, taking pictures and observing. And everyone participated in a giant game of keeping soccer balls and beach balls in the air without hitting the ground. It was an experience.

And in the glow of the Times Square lights at midnight, it felt like I was on a beach somewhere in the middle of the day. And if my brain wasn't telling me how tired I was, I would have believed it. The night was like the day, and darkness was as light.

Darkness gets a bad wrap these days—as being a metaphor for all that is sinister and bad, even for death itself. Symbolic for any lack of understanding, no one wants to be *left in the dark*. On days filled with light—even in the middle of the night, depending on where you are—in a time in human history when we are transfixed by the glow of artificial lights that keep our heads glued to device screens, an age of instant information and knowledge at our fingertips—as a people of faith we have to be wary of the tyranny of light.

Barbara Brown Taylor is a retired Episcopal priest and professor, author of numerous books, and a wise sage who has helped me navigate so much in my own spiritual walk. She wrote a provocative book called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In it, she cautions us about the alarming biological effects that artificial light pollution has had on us as a species. She says, for the past two centuries it's like we've been performing an open-ended science experiment on ourselves, though none of us signed permission slips. The tyranny of light.

Just turning a light on after dark, the receptors in our eyes and skin relay messages to the brain to halt the natural biological rhythms that are leading you toward sleep and prepares you instead to get ready for a new day.

We have to know that while electric light has helped us in some tremendous ways, it has not come without a cost. Some of it, we don't realize. Like how the Milky Way—our home galaxy, made up a billions of stars, used to be visible to the naked eye. In a past time, you could just lay down in the grass at night and gaze up at that spiral of tiny stars and wonder at the expansiveness of the universe. It would hover over as a nightlight—the same star lights that human beings have observed for millennia—constantly keeping life in perspective for us and calling us to awe and wonder. But now, light pollution has made the Milky Way virtually invisible to two-thirds of those living in the US. I haven't lived in places where observing the Milky Way at night was even an option, but I still feel like something has been lost.

Taylor reminds us that our physical well being depends upon darkness. It is essential in our circadian rhythm of waking and sleeping. We need the dark to *be well*. What is being harmed when we flood our world with light?

Another cost of illuminating the night is more spiritual. Taylor writes of how our inner and outer worlds are closely related. If you want a snapshot of the state of your mind these days, take a look at your workspace, your desk. Now, this might be pushing some buttons for some of us. To know just how comfortable we are with the dark, pay attention to how many lights you have to click on in the evening when you get home. Is one not enough? Do we light up the entire house until just before going to bed? Is the flicker of a tv set on there as well?

What do the ways in which we handle darkness on the outside say about how we are handling things internally, like mystery, fear, doubt, and unknowing? We are sometimes still afraid of the dark, you and I. It is much easier to keep ourselves distracted by the invisible hum of illuminating devices rather than sitting with what is causing our inner angst. We have to see the spiritual dimension to this as well.

The psalmist cries out,

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”

There is a freedom in bearing one’s soul to God. There is a primacy in the practice of lament for the Christian. That’s why the Psalms are centralized in our sacred text, and takes up the most real estate as a single book. God welcomes that raw honesty and has encoded it within the covenant relationship. These are dark nights of the soul. A moment to reckon with the trials and disappointments of life. A freedom to lament what is not right and still in need of healing. How long, O Lord? There is an invitation to us in this. To sit in the dark where there are no easy answers.

Notice how the psalmist never receives a response. Maybe you have similar moments—When you begin grumbling with anger or frustration and you sit with it long enough that in the back-and-forth of your internal dialogue, you come out the other end with perspective and peace? The psalmist never gets a response.

There are no easy answers here. But they come to the place of renewed trust: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has dealt bountifully with me.”

You see, when we push back the dark, when we clutter up our lives with so much light-filled entertainment and distractions, we don’t leave ourselves the space to deal with what needs to be cried out before God. Perhaps, instead, we immediately give our attention to entertaining the feedback and opinions of those on our social media feeds. We can become too wrapped up in the immediacy of what the rest of the world is already saying, that we aren’t allowing for a moment to sit with angst and unknowing. We have to be honest about the *noise of knowing* and what has been lost at the level of the soul.

We are over-connected but under-awake. We have never been more connected. Before we get out of bed, we know what happened overnight in Washington, Kyiv, Gaza, Wall Street, Hollywood, and our neighborhood. We carry in our pockets more information than entire libraries once held. We can reach almost anyone, and be reached, instantly. But connection is not the same thing as attentiveness. Connection has created not a peaceful assurance but a frenetic unrest that is never satisfied.

St. Augustine wrote in his autobiography, *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” What does it mean to rest in God? Some neuroscientists have taken this exercise quite literally and in the 1950’s they built the first float tank. REST—Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy. We know it today as a sensory deprivation tank, also called an isolation tank or flotation tank. It is a dark, soundproof tank that is filled with a foot or less of salt water. And in it, you literally float in complete darkness. That complete removal of distraction, be it light or sound, resets the nervous system. I’ve never done this but it’s definitely on the list.

I’m not saying we all need to go out and do a floating tank this week, but I do think there is a spiritual practice this underscores that we can incorporate in our day-to-day lives. What are small steps we can take toward rest? What are ways we can restore those dark spaces in our lives to just sit with unknowing, to detox from being inundated with information? What needs to be wrestled out with God yet lies dormant and unattended within our souls?

To be clear, I am preaching to myself in this. This week, I've become ultra-aware of the ways I am blinded by light. There will be ample opportunity this week for me and my family to disconnect a bit as we head into the mountains for a bit of R and R. I intend to embrace those dark spaces to help me recover what may have been lost recently.

To close, I want to leave us with three places to begin.

Number 1. Practice Turning Off. Sit on the porch without your phone. Drive somewhere without listening to a podcast or music. When was the last time you actually felt bored? The goal isn't digital asceticism. It's recovering the capacity to be present. Look for ways to limit the noise in your life so you can attend to the silence.

Number 2. Practice Sitting with Unknowing. Uncertainty makes us uncomfortable. So, instead of rushing to answers, sit with not knowing. The psalmist doesn't rush to quick answers but sits with questions, "How Long, O Lord?" Linger long on questions this week, like: "What fear have I been driven by lately but too busy to notice? What longing have I been burying underneath all my productivity? Not every question is a problem to solve. Some questions are invitations to pray. But find the space this week to sit with unknowing.

Number 3. In our unknowing, practice trust. There is so much we cannot know, about the rest of today, about what next year will bring, about the next ten years in this church. Practice sitting with uncertainty and cultivate a life of trust. I think a regular practice of being in community and worship helps with this.

In this season of Summer sun and extended nights, find one thing to turn off before you click on yet another screen. Don't just fill the silence, but invite darkness and the space to just be. And there, let your eyes adjust. Let your soul adjust. And be reminded that God is no less present in the darkness than in the light. Amen.