

Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst Reflection at Opening of the Assembly

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The hour is getting late and I would like to send you into the night with a bedtime story of sorts - a story of faith.

Isaiah says: "I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places so that you may know that it is I the God of Israel, who calls you by your name." Is. 45:3 .

As we spend these next days reflecting on The Mystery of God Revealed in our Midst I would like to start our explorations by reminding us that not all revelation comes with light - but that we have a long biblical history of God working with people in the mystery of darkness. The problem is that we have associated darkness with evil and created a sense of fear around it, thus seeking to avoid the experience. The poet Mary Oliver wrote "Someone I love once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift."

Knowing how to walk in the dark takes time. When we do so we sign a waiver that allows us to bump into some things that frighten us at first. But all we need do is to ask the mystery of darkness to teach us, to follow the darkness wherever it leads, and to become intimate with darkness.

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There certainly are negative biblical images of darkness: You know them well, Scripture often equates darkness and blindness with spiritual failure, however there is another side of the story.

Abraham and Sarah: Remember, they have an argument with God about not having the promised offspring. God tells them to go outside: "count the stars if you are able." The night sky was a key player in their decision to trust God.

Jacob wrestles in the middle of the night. He had fled from family betrayal, down into the middle of nowhere, fell asleep and had a vision. God says, more or less, "Know I am with you and will keep you wherever you go for I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you." Once again, this night experience was a key player in Jacob's decision to believe in God.

Joseph: dreams at night, gets Pharaoh's attention. and goes from dungeon to the palace.

Exodus happened at night:

Manna falls from the sky at night.

One of the heaviest scriptural clusters of revelation in darkness has nothing to do with literal darkness. It happens in the events at Mt. Sinai. God tells Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and to trust you ever after." The top of the Mount is covered in a dark cloud. God calls Moses into the dark cloud and then God speaks: Again - the voice is from the darkness: "I am God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." A unique word for this kind of darkness is used here: araphel. Thick darkness that reveals divine presence, a presence which is seen even as it is obscured. It is a nuanced darkness, as sure a sign of God's presence as brightness is.

Finally, in the tradition of Christian Mysticism: "mysterium tremendum et fascinans." *"This darkness and cloud is always between you and God, no matter what you do and it prevents you from seeing God clearly by the light of understanding in your reason and from experiencing God in sweetness of love in your affection. So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after the One whom you love. For if you are to experience God or to see God at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness."* wrote 14th Century author of the ***Cloud of Unknowing***.

So to be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. To want a life with only half of these things is to want half a life.

"I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places so that you may know that it is I the God of Israel, who calls you by your name." Is. 45:3 .

What about the historical meaning of this passage. This was a promise to Cyrus, the new Persian king, indicating that there were treasures from the time of the Babylonian kings that he would find to give him what he needed to rule well. These would be treasures (literal riches) likely hidden in dark deeply dug tunnels which was the safest way to secure one's possessions in those days. The assurance is that Cyrus will have what we need from what has gone before to lead well. It is a good reminder that we too will have what we need from what has gone before us.

So go into the night, trusting in this Holy Mystery. The dark will be your womb tonight. The night will give you a horizon further than you can see. (David Whyte)

Go there with this wisdom, which is an interpretation of a Rilke poem by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

You, darkness, of whom I am born —

I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illumines
and excludes all the rest.

But the darkness embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations — just as they are.

It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night.

So go, let the darkness be your womb tonight. Let us have good dreams, and remember:

"I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places so that you may know that it is I the God of Israel, who calls you by your name." Is. 45:3