

Rev. Linda E. Owens
Beaverkill Community Church
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Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

In Defense of the Dark

It was 1985 (which doesn't seem that long ago ... until I did the math) that I was sent to Taipei, Taiwan to teach an eight-week reading and study skills course to students at the American School there. I was twenty-two and I had never been out of the country before. Readak Educational Services, my employer, sent two of us to teach the program to middle school and high school students. Mary Jude, my colleague, wasn't any more traveled than I. We were naïve and ready for an adventure ... a dangerous combination.

We were housed in an apartment on the outskirts of the city. There wasn't a single sign in English, or anyone who could speak it around, except for a VFW hall that served real American hamburgers, and a family two floors above us who were missionaries from Kansas.

On weekends Mary Jude and I traveled. Our teacher paychecks didn't go very far when we were working stateside, but in Taiwan in the 1980's it was enough to get around and see the sights. One weekend we decided to travel south to the Sun Moon Lake region, an area of the country that we were told was beautiful, a resort area, a popular honeymoon destination. It sounded good to us. On a Friday afternoon, after school let out, we hopped a train and then a bus. The ride was long, maybe four or five hours. We left behind the bustling city of Taipei, traveled down the west coast and then by bus, as the darkness began to settle over the land, we took a turn inland ... leaving behind the well-lit coastal towns in favor of the dark twisty rural roads.

We had with us our tour book, which listed our final destination in both Chinese and English so that once we arrived at our destination we could communicate with a taxi driver. I have to tell you that making hotel reservations had been a real challenge given the language barrier. We had found the hotel through a travel guide, but when we made the call to book the reservation, we found that the desk staff only spoke Chinese. After a couple of hang ups and a second and a third try, the hotel clerk found someone who spoke enough English to understand what we were looking for and to book our room.

Did I mention that we were the only foreigners on the train and the bus? When we arrived at our final stop, you would have thought we were giving away money ... or perhaps that we are an easy mark to be cheated out of it. We were swarmed by taxi drivers hoping for our business. One grabbed my bag right out of my hand. Another

took Mary Jude's arm. Others jabbered at us in Chinese. All of a sudden this trip felt like a bad idea. Until that moment, our biggest concern had been finding a taxi driver. We had no idea how this was going to unfold. There was however one driver who spoke a little English and seemed to understand our plight. He freed my bag from the hands of an exuberant cabby and returned it to me and said in broken English, "follow me." It wasn't much to go on. What made this guy more reputable than the rest? But it was all we had to go on. So we got into his cab, which by the way didn't look like a cab just a beaten up hatchback, and we showed him the name of our hotel written in English and Chinese. "I take you there," he said.

It was late and it was very dark. As the lights of the bus station faded, there was little light to take its place. The night was clear, but the moon was gone. We didn't need to see to know that we were climbing a mountain, twisting and turning our way up. But we could have been anywhere or nowhere ... on our way to a great adventure or some horrible end. We were as far away home as it was possible to go, and we were both feeling more than a little uncomfortable. We were scared.

As I remember, the ride was about a half an hour. The driver was true to his word. He took us to the Tien Hsiang Lodge, which boasted cozy, clean, comfortable rooms. It was too dark to get a good look at the place, but it was clear that it was motel, and that is was in the middle of nowhere. If there was a lake, we couldn't see it or hear it. There was feeling of more mountain surrounding us, hugging us tight, not unlike what it feels like in the narrow hollows of Appalachia. There was an open-air restaurant next door. The patio was outlined in strings of white lights. The sound of American Top Forty tunes, which sounded strangely out of place, blasted from the bar's speaker. It felt like an episode of the Twilight Zone. None of this is what we had imagined it would be. We got our room key and settled into a small room with the bare essentials. It wasn't dirty, but it felt old and musty. We tried to laugh about our ignorance in thinking that we were seasoned, capable travelers. There was really nothing we could do now except turn in for the night, praying that wasn't the Taiwanese version of the Bates' Motel. In the morning, we thought, we will know where we are.

When I first delivered this sermon a few months back in January, it was during the season of Epiphany. Epiphany falls right after Christmas. It is a season that celebrates light, light literally, but even more so metaphorically ... the idea that God has revealed the divine self through Jesus, whom we know as the light of the world. Today's gospel lesson the epiphany comes with the baptism Jesus, as he rises from the river Jordan and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove and God whispers in his ear, "***You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.***" ... light being shed on Jesus' true identity and mission.

If we were to paint a picture of this moment, and of course many have, we would no doubt picture Jesus rising from the river with beams of light emanating down from heaven, bathing him in holy pleasure, or perhaps the light would radiate out from him

symbolizing the light of divine approval moving out from him unto all the world. Either way there would certainly be light. After all, God created light and pronounced it good. The psalmist tells us that God's word is the light that illuminates our path and John's gospel tells us that Jesus is God's word made flesh and in him was life and that life was the light of all people.

So Epiphany is the season of light. But what about the darkness? If light is life, then is darkness death? If light illumines the path, then darkness must obliterate it? If Jesus is the light, than what of the darkness? Is it evil or simply empty?

Remember when as a child the dark of night was the playground for monsters of all kinds ... the ones that lived in our closets or under our beds? Our only consolation was a night light and the door to our bedrooms cracked open. Really it is as simple as day and night, good and bad, light and dark ... right? Isn't that what we are told from the very beginning?

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. They God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

See? There it is. God created light to save us from the darkness. The light is good. The dark is bad. But wait. That is NOT what the bible says. Read it again, carefully. There is no judgment about the dark. It was either created by God or preexistent with God. Either way God was present in the dark. In a spark of creative genius, God imagined light as a companion to the darkness. God created light, but not to extinguish the dark, but to compliment it. If God had wanted to extinguish the dark, then there would be no need to separate the two ... light wins every time. But God did separate the dark from the light, night from day, in the first act of creation.

I think darkness has gotten a bad rap. The human race has a long history of vilifying the dark: darkness as the metaphor for all things evil, sad, confusing, and bad. We have done all in our power to keep the dark at bay: street lights, car lights, high-beams and low, security lights, night lights, alarm clock lights, the light of our cell phones, tablets and TVs, the annoying pulsating light of the computer power button ... we have lit up everything we possibly can so that can see where we are.

All that light has disrupted our sleep cycles, and polluted the divinely ordained darkness of the night. It is in some strange way ironic that the light that the night offers, the moon and the stars, is often reduced or eliminated by the lights we have invented to fend off the dark. Yet those very stars that we in some pockets of the world have to strain to see, are the very means of God's epiphanal revelations.

It was in the dark of night, that God made his promise to Abram. Look at the stars in the sky. I will make from your seed a great nation that outnumbers those stars, a nation that will be to the whole world, a blessing.

It was a star in the night sky that lit the path for the wise men to journey on to the place where Jesus was.

It was under that canopy of the heavens, in the dark of night, that Jacob wrestled with a stranger of divine origin, wrestling through the pain of a dislocated hip in order to receive from God a blessing ... a promise ... and with that promise a new name ... *ISRAEL* ... which means struggled with God and prevailed.

It was at night under the stars that Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, wrestling with God and his own integrity, knowing what that would cost him in the light of the coming day.

That same Jesus, in resurrected form, blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, robbed him of the light of day, in order that Paul, who at that time was known as Saul, might see the light of Christ. So that the one who was determined to persecute Jesus' followers, might now become a follower himself.

We are afraid of the dark, the metaphorical dark, because in it we are much more likely to come face to face with the truth of who we are and who we need to be. We have learned as adults that the monsters that hide in our closets and under our beds aren't of the comic book variety, but much more scary still of our own making ... our fears and thoughts of regret, and failure, judgment and the future. Perhaps the unknown is the scariest monster of them all. We prefer day to night because in the light of day there is so much to be done, no time for monsters. It is the practicality of light that draws us out of our thoughts and busies us with unending chores. There is that which must get done, and that which we choose to do. We can do great things and meaningless things, or a combination of both. But in the dark, when much of what we busy ourselves in the day can no longer be done, we see with our other senses. In fact all our other senses are heightened in the dark. When we, in the daytime, try hard to concentrate on some thought or idea, we often cover our eyes so that our mind can see ... can think ... can hear, unencumbered by all that seeks to distract us.

In the dark is where much of the good stuff happens ... the important stuff ... the truth telling stuff. In the dark we are forced to trust. In the dark faith is a necessity, rather than a luxury. In the dark must follow whatever light we are given, whether great or small, brilliant or dim. In the dark we take the light we are given ... not the light we make, but the light God gives in the glory of the moon and stars, which remind us how very vast the universe is and how very small we are. We take the light that we are given in the whispers of the Holy Spirit who reminds us that we too are God's children; beloved and in whom God finds great pleasure, and in the company of others who accompany us in the darkness some as strangers and some as friends, all with a little bit of light to share

and we face our truths together. We wait. We listen. We move forward in small increments of light, just enough for one step at a time.

Day always follows night ... but then night always follows day. And that is the God-ordained cycle of life. It is not good or bad. We are not given the option to live only in the light, or to hide always in the dark. It is both and proposition. And that is how it is meant to be.

When the first hint of light came through the crack in our curtain drawn windows in that motel near Sun Moon Lake, there came with it a sense of relief, and gratitude that we had survived the night. It was not hard to get out of bed that morning, to pull open those curtains and see for the first time the beauty of the verdant, narrow mountains that had were indeed hugging us on every side in this now charming, secluded hotel. We were isolated, yes, but nestled in a beautiful and foreign landscape that felt welcoming not terrifying. As we toured around in the light of day, we realized that the road we traveled at the hands of our cab driver was not only steep, but narrow and without guardrails of any kind. We realized that we had fallen into the hands of a skillful driver who knew his way in the dark. One who had spoken to us in words we could understand ... *“follow me.”*

AMEN.

Inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*