

“Lovely, Dark, and Deep”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

A favourite Hasidic story tells of a teacher who, near his death, brings his student into a dark forest. The teacher carries a lantern to guide them through the forest. Once they reach the heart of the forest, the teacher extinguishes the light. The student asks his teacher, “Will you leave me here in the darkness?” “No,” came the teacher’s response, “I will leave you searching for the light.”

From “Jewish Spiritual Guidance: Finding Our Way to God” by Carol Ochs and Kerry M. Olitzky

Reading “Mt Lemmon, Steward Observatory, 1990”
by Alison Hawthorne Deming

What it takes to dazzle us, masters of dazzle,
all of us here together at the top of the world,
is a night without neon or mercury lamps.
Black sheen flowing above,
the stars unnamed and disorderly—
diamonds, a ruby or sapphire,
scattered and made
more precious for being cut
from whatever strand
once held them together.
The universe is emptiness and dust,
occasional collisions, collapsing zones of gas,
electrical bursts, and us.

Here is the 60-inch scope where
we struggle to see one pinpoint of light,

each singularity with its timid twinkle
become a city of stars, that trapezoidal
grouping at the end of Orion's sword,
a cloudy nursery spawning
galactic stuff, lit but not illuminated
by a glassy hot blue star. What is it to see?
A mechanism wired in the brain
that leads to wonder. What is it
to wonder but to say
what we've seen, and having said it,
need to see farther.

Here are the globulars and spirals,
the dumbbell, ring, and crab—particles
swept like water in a drain, shapes
mapping the torque that shapes them,
tension of matter, micro- and
macro-scopic, orbiting, electron
and planet straining at apogee
like a husky on the leash.
Here is Pegasus, the Great Square—
call it the Baseball Diamond, a story
we can see, one we can use
to find our way back. A scientist
can say *NGC5194/5* to another
and the other says, *Abbh*,
picturing the massive whirlpool, its
small companion galaxy eddying by its side.

Call it the Nipple with a nearby Mole,
call it the chief Executive Officer
walking his Spitz. Describing *is* imagining—
knowing, not knowing but
having the language
to convey, to *be* the water carrier,
Aquarius, to quench another.
I saw it with my own eyes.
Seeing is believing.
That paloverde tree is green.
On earth as it is in heaven.
But the sky is not blue

and the stars are not a drifting dome,
merely coordinates plotted on
the immensity inside—
the Eternity we walk in when we dream.

Still the universe (the way we see it)
is more real than Heraclitus,
who said the stars were solid bowls
filled with fire, fire which feeds
on the ocean's watery breath.
Why not, since water is consumed
by fire, imagine it as food?
Why not think the brain's
favourite food is seeing?
We still don't know what light is.
Where matter comes from. How the dust
became fire. Why our fire must
turn to dust. And all we have to go on
(refining the instrument) is our selves—
the skin at the tip of our fingers.

All we have to go on is ignorance—
to pay attention to what we've missed.
tides? Amorph—
one scientist's notation in
The Atlas of Galaxies
beneath a shapeless smudge.
They have to take it seriously, everything
they see, trying to invent
a way to pass it on. In this
they are poets as much as
the visitor who says,
Ohhh, a shooting star,
after she's been told
nothing is burning, nothing shooting,
merely molecules of sky jumping
as dust from beyond whizzes by.
Here is the world's biggest mirror—
a million dollars to cast
the glass in hexagonal molds,
to spin the gleaming saucer

parabolic, then a computer
to cool it cell by cell—
six weeks of that and then another
million, two years to polish
the surface to digital perfection.
Here are those gods and goddesses
seen for what they are—battered rock
and frigid gas, sulfur boiling out
into murderous air—
all of us here together
watching from our blue oasis,
whirling in a frozen fading night
where there is not enough
matter to explain why any of it
is here.

Consider the moon. A fault
visible tonight near the terminator
looks like a crease in fresh plaster.
Sea of Rains, Ocean of Storms.
But it has never been moist, never felt dew or rivers.
Marsh of Sleep, Sea of Ingenuity—
a map of our misunderstanding.
The wonder is we still can see
the way it pours liquid pearl
over the earth's dark waters
after we know its windless surface,
that implacable dust the moon travelers said
smelled like cap guns, is cratered
with a wire-braced flag, two lunar jeeps,
and footprints no weather will arrive to erase.

Here is the observatory at 1 a.m.,
white domes humming on the mountain top
like brains, antennae feeling
(a mechanism wired) their way
into the wilderness. They won't explain
a thing about the wealth
of blackberries in Labrador,
or the sleep of velvet bats
hanging in the eaves drugged by the sun.

They won't fix history or touch the places
inside we can't get close to.

Looking up, we just keep falling.

Here are the owls who navigate
in darkness, here the scattered prey.

Sermon: "Lovely, Dark, and Deep"

It catches me by surprise every time.

I switch off the light, and as my head hits the pillow,
I see a mysterious word hovering up above on the ceiling.

The scene plays out the same every night
in the guestroom of Bob's parents' house.

In the darkness, just over the bed, in large glowing letters
appears the word: "Sweet."

Now, the funny thing is that there's no visible sign of this when the lights are on.
No evidence to be found in the light of day.

I keep forgetting to mention it to Bob's mom. . .

My guess is the word was put there or painted there by the teenager
who last lived in the room before Bob's parents bought the house,
or, that maybe, it was the previous set of parents themselves
who put up the words "Sweet Dreams" to tuck their child into bed each night.

Whatever its origins, I always appreciate this final good word,
this last benediction at the close of my day.

It is a reminder that life is, indeed, sweet,
no matter how challenging, no matter how hard.

And, it is a regular reminder to me
that there are things that can only be seen in the dark.

That's what I most loved about the poem I shared with you earlier.

It speaks to me of that feeling of awesome wonder we get
when we get beyond the bright lights of the city
out to a night sky burning with twinkling stars.

There, when I'm beyond the reach of our world of unceasing light,
with its neon signs and lamp posts and compact fluorescent bulbs,
I look up into the vast night sky and am reminded
that my address in this universe is so very, very small.

I look up and out into the starry heavens,
seeing the radiance pulsing from galaxies so far away
we measure their distance in years of light,
and I am reminded how incredibly brief is my moment to behold any of this.

I look up, and though I don't know their proper names,
like that scientist with a special fondness for *NGC5194*,
every fibre of my being ooohs and ahhs at the precious sight of it all,
as though the word 'Sweet' itself were emblazoned across the sky
as some constellation called Gratitude.

Abraham Heschel, the 20th century Jewish theologian said,

We can never sneer at the stars,
mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being.

Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe.
Away from the immense,
cloistered in our own concepts,
we may scorn and revile everything.

But standing between earth and sky, we are silenced by the sight...

That sacred silence, that sacred silencing, is the dark's greatest gift.

No matter how majestic and mighty the Sun may be,
I find I only feel this deep, silent sense of wonder
when I look out to the billions and billions of stars beyond our own.

Which means I feel it only at night.
And, only in the dark.

It's a privileged place to be, I realise—
to see the darkness as a means of deepening our connection with life
rather than a threat to our lives themselves.

Unlike the earliest humans, who, in the darkening days of winter,
surely wondered whether the light would ever return,
struggling to understand the patterns and seasons of the year,
we have the gift of knowing
 that, with day building upon day,
 the light will steadily grow and the wheel of the year will turn again.

Indeed, we have endless resources at our fingertips to tell us
the precise moment of the sunrise and the sunset of each day.

With the proper mathematical modeling,
 it's possible to project such data for millennia to come.

As a result, we have learned that we need not be so afraid of the dark.
We now know that darkness can be endured, and even embraced.

And, so our celebrations as we approach this Winter Solstice,
aren't, then, so much a hoping that the sun will come back to us,
as much as an affirmation of our deep gratitude that it does.

Truth be told, it's been this way for thousands of years.

While, there once was good cause to fear the dark,
the ancients eventually figured out how things worked.

Without the benefit of all of today's technologies,
people the world over came to know, with exacting precision,
just when to schedule their winter celebrations.

So confident were they, they built up
great monuments, and pyramids, and temples
to mark the dawning of the very day
that ushered in the return of the sun's light and warmth.

For thousands of years, the Solstice has been celebrated
not because people hoped the sun would return,
 but because they knew that it would.

As Davidson Lohr puts it, our ancestors knew "full well
that the sun [would] start returning and days [would] get longer,

and [that they were] safe in the hands of Mother Nature,
[who] always gives birth to the light again.”

Solstice, then, is the great affirmation of life itself,
that we celebrate at this time of year—
a feast of gratitude that underscores so much else of what we do in this season.

A celebration that life carries on, and that with the turning of the year,
the spinning globe that gave us birth, carries us right along with it.

Solstice reminds us of our good fortune
to be swept up in the whirl of it all,
as our own amazing blue dot swirls through space
around the Sun that was, and is, and ever shall be
the source of not only of our sustenance, but of our very being.

And, so, with steady assurance of the light’s return
and the promise of springtime come again,
we, in our day, can savour this season of darkness and the gifts it has to offer.

We can embrace its stillness and its silence
connecting, again and again, to the source of life, to ourselves, and to each other.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke describes his own experience in this.
He writes:

I love the dark hours of my being.
My mind deepens into them.

There I can find, as in old letters,
the days of my life, already lived,
and held like a legend, and understood.

Then the knowing comes: I can open
to another life that’s wide and timeless.

So I am sometimes like a tree
rustling over a gravesite
and making real the dream
of the one its living roots
embrace:

a dream once lost
among sorrows and songs.¹

Rilke speaks to how the dark hours invite us into reflection
and a deepening understanding of self—
a journey that can lead on to an increasing openness
to inhabit “another life that’s wide and timeless.”

It’s only fair, though, to acknowledge here that not everyone
finds the darkness quite as healing and empowering as Rilke did.

As a minister, I know this season is particularly tough for some.
The dark and cold that surround us
are often powerful metaphors for how we feel inside.

For those suffering with grief, or depression, or loneliness,
with angst and anger and anxiety,
these days of darkness can just as easily magnify the misery as alleviate it.

This season of shining light and pealing bells does little to ease the pain.
And sometimes only serves to make things worse.

The expectation to be always of good cheer
can simply be too much to bear when hope is hard to find
and we might feel we know little of comfort and joy.

And, yet, even in such Dark Nights of the Soul,
are the seeds of genuine spiritual growth to be found.

In his book *The Courage to Be*, the theologian Paul Tillich
spoke of the “courage in and above every courage”—
the strength that carries us through
when everything we thought we knew of courage has been exhausted.²

The courage beyond every other courage.

The courage, as drawn from the meaning in the ancient French,

¹ *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy.

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 187-189.

that speaks to the strength of the heart.

Take heart.

Take courage.

Such courage is what surely drew the ancients up the sides of hills in the depths of winter to keep watch for the return of the light—
to look out, with hope beyond hope, for the first ray of sun on their faces,
to glimpse some glimmering sign that light and life were returning.

It always came, of course, breaking forth on the horizon.

But, the thing to remember is that they made the climb in the dark.

They clambered up the hill in the darkest hours before dawn.

And, as they sat in the still silence of a long winter's night,
I have to wonder what it must have meant to behold the sky above them.

For all of our innovations with artificial light,
for every telescope we turn toward the heavens in search of meaning,
are we really all that different from our ancestors?

We may know with certainty the Earth will continue to spin on her axis, and
that the days will definitely grow longer, but still we are called, in the dark of
night, to climb up hills with sacred, shining hope in our hearts.

In his play, "J.B.," Archibald MacLeish, offers a contemporary telling of the
story of Job.

J.B. is a modern man who has lost everything, and through the course of the
play, he struggles to find meaning in the midst of such hopelessness.

At the end, when J.B. reunites with his wife, Sarah,
they turn to the dimmed shambles of their home,
and J.B. remarks that "It's too dark to see."

In that moment, he speaks not just of their home but of the world.

Sarah says to him, “Then blow on the coal of the heart, my darling.”

And, J.B. asks, “The coal of the heart?”

“Blow on the coal of the heart,” Sarah says.

“The candles in churches are out.

The lights have gone out in the sky.

Blow on the coal of the heart, and we’ll see by and by . . .”

In this season of darkness, let us honour the glowing coal,
the burning ember of hope that sustains us through the longest night.

And, in this season of so many lights, let us honour the deep darkness
which allows even the dimmest light to be seen.

For there are, indeed, many things that can only be seen in the dark.

So while we wait for the Sun, let us turn our gaze to the sky
in search of that constellation called gratitude,
the one that wishes us, with each night, “Sweet Dreams.”

Blessed Be.