

**Message for January 29, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church**  
“Treasures in the Darkness” Rev. Trish Eckert

I felt drawn to today’s passage as I sought out texts that address the gifts of the dark. Before we enter the specificity of that, I want to provide some background for this text from the prophet Isaiah, which is addressing the time of the Babylonian exile, which began in 587 B.C. when Babylonia destroyed Jerusalem and forced the Jewish people into exile in Babylon. Many years later, after Babylon fell to Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus issued an edict that made it possible for the exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

Cyrus the Great ruled Persia from 558 to 530 BCE, establishing a vast empire that spanned the ancient Near East and swaths of southwest and central Asia. Cyrus’s policy of permitting local cultural autonomy meant that subjugated nations could continue to worship in their accustomed ways. When Cyrus defeated the Babylonians in 539, he allowed their Judean captives to return home and rebuild the ruined temple in Jerusalem.

Sometimes we are surprised by whom God sends to help, especially when they are different from us. This passage from Isaiah describes God making an unexpected choice to aid the people of Israel. Having suffered in exile, they believe that God has promised to send them a Messiah, someone to set them free. They have waited a long time for liberation, but count on God’s promise to come true.

In this passage, God is ready to act, but not in the way Israel expects. God selects Cyrus, the king of Persia, to defeat Babylon and allow Israel to return home. As a gentile and foreign king, Cyrus is perhaps the last person they would have thought to rescue them. Why not one of them, a native Hebrew? Why a potential enemy?

Certainly, these questions could take us to some interesting places, and yet this morning, as we consider what we’ve explored regarding light this season, it follows that we also turn our attention to the dark. My reflections this morning are essentially a conversation between two incredible thinkers and writers: the writer and minister, Barbara Brown Taylor, and the Franciscan Priest and author, Richard Rohr.

As Father Rohr reminds us, “If we are going to talk about light, then we must also talk about darkness, because they only have meaning in relation to one another.”

I believe I mentioned last week the incredible book by Barbara Brown Taylor, “Learning to Walk in the Dark.” She presents so beautifully how our society pushes away darkness – both literally and metaphorically – and so I’ll be quoting from her text extensively as we consider what “treasures of darkness” God offers us. What might we be avoiding? What ultimately cannot be avoided and how do we more intentionally open ourselves to such experiences and embrace growth and an ever-deepening connection to ourselves, to God, and to one another?

*In Barbara Brown Taylor’s introduction, she writes ...when I look around the world today, it seems clear that eliminating darkness is pretty high on the human agenda - not just physical darkness but also metaphysical darkness, which includes psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual darkness. What do I mean by “darkness?” ...Most people do not know what they mean by “darkness” except that they want to stay out of it. Just say the word and the associations begin to flow: night, nightmare, ghost, graveyard, cave, bat, vampire, death, double, evil, criminal, danger, doubt, depression, loss, fear. Fear is the main thing. Almost everyone is afraid of being afraid. Beyond that, no one’s list is exactly like anyone else’s. It fits the way a shadow fits, because darkness is sticky. It attracts meaning like a magnet, picking up everything in its vicinity that is not fully lit.*

*She explains, ... “darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me - that I want no part of - either because I’m sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love - if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.*

*At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to*

*water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.*

This is such an elemental statement – we know, intellectually, that we need both light and dark – such cycles enable our bodies to rest and replenish so that we have the energy to function well the next day. We know that too much of anything is not good for us.

*Richard Rohr tells us, In much of the world’s art, the sun and the moon are pictured together as sacred symbols. The solar light gives glaring brightness but paradoxically creates defined shadows. Patriarchal religions usually preferred ‘sun’ gods and the worship of fire, light, and order. While order and clarity are good, they also give us an arrogance about that very order and clarity. The very sun that illuminates also blinds, dehydrates, and kills when we get too much of it.*

*Lunar light is much more subtle, filtered, and indirect, and in that sense, more clarifying and not so quickly conclusive. Note that when God first divided light from darkness, God did not call it “good” (Genesis 1:3).*

*All things on earth are a mixture of darkness and light. When we idolize things as totally good or condemn otherness as totally bad, we get ourselves in trouble. Jesus simplifies this task by saying: “God alone is good” (Mark 10:18). Even the good things of this world are still subject to imperfection, wounding, and decay. I find it very hard to admit, but often tragedies produce much good fruit and good people.*

I so appreciate Father Rohr’s reflection here: *Jesus is a “lunar” teacher, patient with darkness and slow growth. He says, “The seed is sprouting and growing but we do not know how” (Mark 4:27). He even shockingly says to let the good and bad seeds grow together until the harvest (Matthew 13:30). He seems to be willing to live with non-perfection, surely representing the cosmic patience and freedom of God, who is Infinite Love and Life that finally fills all the gaps. When you are God and you know you will ultimately “win”—because Love will always win—you do not have to nail everything down along the way. You can work happily*

*and even effectively with “mustard seeds” (Mark 4:31) and with “the good and bad alike” sitting at the same table (Matthew 22:10).*

Richard Rohr’s description of Jesus as a “lunar” teacher brought to mind for me what Barbara Brown Taylor writes regarding what she calls her “lunar spirituality.”

*She notes, ... the divine light available to me waxes and wanes with the season. When I go out on my porch at night, the moon never looks the same way twice. Some nights it is as round and bright as a headlight; the other nights it is thinner than the sickle hanging in my garage. Some nights it is high in the sky, and other nights low over the mountains. Some nights it is altogether gone, leaving a vast web of stars that are brighter in its absence. All in all, the moon is a truer mirror for my soul than the sun that looks the same way every day.*

As she considers how the physical world mirrors her interior world, she writes, *...a great curiosity opened up: what would my life with God look like if I trusted this rhythm instead of opposing it? What was I afraid of, exactly, and how much was I missing by reaching reflexively for the lights?*

So often, as I sit with individual parishioners or in Adult Education settings, I hear people seeking language/ways to articulate their beliefs – especially while discussing with those who seem to have all of the answers – nice tidy boxes filled in/coloring within the lines... but Richard Rohr and Barbara Brown Taylor both illustrate for us the nuances, the layers – which provides a more robust response to our lives and to accompany us on our faith journey:

*at the theological level, [the language of “darkness”] creates all sorts of problems. It divides everyday in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own time period it implies things about dark skinned people and sight impaired people that are not true. Worst of all, it offers people of faith a giant closet in which they can store everything that threatens or frightens them without thinking too much about those things. It rewards them for their unconsciousness, offering spiritual justification for turning away from those things....*

*to embrace that teaching and others like it at face value can result in a kind of spirituality that deals with darkness by denying its existence or at least depriving it of any meaningful attention. I call it full solar spirituality, since it focuses on staying in the light of God around the clock, both absorbing and reflecting the sunnyside of faith. ... the trouble starts when darkness falls on your life, which can happen in any number of unsurprising ways: you lose your job, your marriage falls apart, your child acts out in some attention-getting way, you pray hard for something that does not happen, you begin to doubt some of the things you have been taught about what the Bible says.*

Ultimately, as I sought out other Bible wisdom teachings that present darkness from a positive standpoint, it was most noticeable in the Book of Genesis. Both Richard Rohr and Barbara Brown Taylor reflect on this, as well. We hear in:

**Genesis 1:2**

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

**Genesis 1:5**

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

*As Richard Rohr writes, Note that when God first divided light from darkness, God did not call it “good” (Genesis 1:3). At the very beginning of the Bible we are warned that we cannot totally separate light from darkness, or the two have no meaning. The whole of Creation exists inside of one full cycle: “Evening came and morning came and it was the first day” (Genesis 1:5). Separating them is apparently not good!*

*Barbara Brown Taylor contributes her observations to the same text, In the book of Genesis, darkness was first; light came second. Darkness was upon the face of the deep before God said anything. Then God said “light” and there was light, but the second word God said was NOT “darkness,” because the darkness was already there. How did it get there? What was it made of? I do not know. All I know is that darkness was not created; it was already there, so God’s act on the first day of creation was not to make light and darkness but to make light and separate it from the darkness, calling the light “day” and the darkness “night.”*

All of these observations are an invitation to us to recognize the purpose and the gift of darkness, in our natural world as well as in our internal – psychological/spiritual/emotional world. As we take some time for silent contemplation, I invite you to consider the gifts and the difficulties that dark times hold for you.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- What are you most frightened of in dark times?
- What gifts have you found in the dark?
- How do you open yourself to those gifts and revelations?
- In what ways have your experiences of the dark shaped you?