

Adventures in the Dark

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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Thank you to our Youth Group for the conversations that helped inspire this sermon, and for their involvement in this first “Youth Collaborative Service!”

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When I was small, I played a game with the dark in the hallway.

Whenever I had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I pretended that as long as I was back in my bed by the time the toilet was done flushing, nothing bad could happen to me.

I would push down that handle and *dash* down the hallway, leaping into bed and pulling the blankets up while the water still whirled.

I wasn't afraid of the dark, exactly – I let go of my nightlight fairly early on. But something about the unguarded, unwatched dark right outside my bedroom door repelled me, even as it beckoned. Something could be out there, lying in wait. Who knows what the night contains?

And though I might have feared aspects of the night, it also intrigued me, as after bedtime my parents murmured together, or watched tv, or played cards with my grandparents, somewhere out there past the dark hall. What was going on out there, and why couldn't I see it too?

Eventually, like we all do, I grew in to the night, as I was allowed to stay up later (and stayed up beyond when I was allowed.)

In talking with the youth, we shared our memories of the first time we stayed up all night, or almost all night. For some it was talking or chatting online with friends, for some it was playing video games, for others it was reading a book.

That last one is my first late night memory: carried away by the plot of a story, I just kept reading under the covers with a flashlight, until my eyelids felt crackily and dry, and my brain felt stuffed with cotton. I remember feeling proud and a little bit guilty, as I finished the book and turned off my flashlight for an hour of sleep before the start of the day.

These days, I would *never* stay up all night by choice; my relationship to the night is often characterized more by exhaustion than exhilaration.

But I bet that each of us can think of those times when we have explored the landscape of the night with curious wonder and expectation, feeling that anything might be possible out under the velvety black sky.

That's the feeling we kept coming back to, the youth group and I, and we agreed... there's something about the dark.

Something that both frightens and beckons us, like in the story of Lazslo.

Something that speaks to the silent yearning of our souls, as the poet Rilke seems to express.

Something that breathes of risk and possibility, adventure and pulsing alive-ness.

We talked about the imagination and creativity that opens into the night, new senses heightened by the absence of vision, energy focused within and without.

As the Phantom of the Opera sings in the song we just heard: "Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation / Darkness stirs and wakes imagination / Silently the senses abandon their defenses"

In the teen years, nighttime is often a time of adventure and growth – we make decisions both good and bad in the dark that help us to explore and form who we are. We imagine who we will become.

In my teen years, *mostly* within our 10pm curfew, my friends and I explored independence in the dark and followed our imaginations with abandon – playing hide and seek in the Super Walmart, dancing in the car, singing and writing songs, and flirting in the Sonic parking lot.

Outside the containing walls of school or home, we dreamed together about the future that stretched before us, the imagined and unimagined possibilities that it would bring.

Today the future is more clear, possibilities pared away by choice and circumstance, yet my imagination still awakens and stirs amid the dark.

I find the holy spirit of creativity invades me in that in-between space of the night quite often – my cell phone is full of voice memos in which I've recorded ideas, sermon tid-bits, and stories in a slow and sleep-filled voice.

There's something about the dark. Something that stirs the mind and soul to recognize what lies just beyond the senses... Something that pulls us closer to mystery.

Perhaps this is why we close our eyes to meditate or pray, the transformation of our spirits aided by the dreaming dark beyond what our mind can grasp.

The Phantom sings once more: “Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar /And you live as you've never lived before.”

We talked as well about the openness we find in the dark, the vulnerability that is possible away from the glare of day – conversations deeper than we could imagine having in the light, physical inhibitions lessened in dance or play or love. Could it be that under cover of darkness, our very souls, usually so shy, are inclined to show themselves?

In this time when neon lights pollute the night – one could easily equate the darkness with the real. The dimming of artificial light could easily be a symbol of the stripping away of every emotional artifice or barrier.

There's a UU youth group game called truth in the dark, where everyone finds a spot to lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling. The lights are turned out, and the youth take turns asking questions both silly and profound, and speaking their answers into the darkness.

The game shows a profound spiritual truth. The darkness opens us, breaches our defenses, demands our surrender. And it is in that most tender place that truth resides.

Many Christian mystics speak of the Dark Night of the Soul as the only way to God, because it takes a great, vulnerable openness to encounter that which is most holy. To know ourselves connected to God, Love, or all Beings takes a deep descent into the mystery of our unknowing, and the great spiritual risk of uncertainty.

It is this encounter that defines us as people of faith, the journey through the darkness to the core of things.

We also talked about the connection we feel in the dark, intimacy created by openness to one another, but also empathy created by our universal vulnerability in facing the mysteries of the dark.

We find courage with each other in the dark, stepping toward our fears, and finding we can survive them. Perhaps this is why for eons humans have held hands and lit fires and raised our voices together into the dark of winter.

Certainly this is why I visited and ran from the darkness in my hallway as a child - an instinct of curiosity and fear at the uncertainty that lurks in the dark. Stepping out into the night is often a venture into the unknown, and so the dark is a rich symbol of the mystery that enfolds our human lives. The mystery that both threatens and upholds us.

In the depth of that mystery – that upon which our very lives rest, but which our minds cannot comprehend - it helps to know that we are not alone; that the darkness of night

and the darkness of our unknowing presses in upon us all. We have each other as guides and helpers and fellow pilgrims in the dark.

And we also have the gentle accompaniment of the mystery, itself, who is both foreign and known to us in our very souls.

Rilke points to another truth of this great mystery. "You," he writes. "You, darkness, that I come from."

The darkness is complete mystery, and yet it is known to us as our source. We come from it, though we will never understand it. As the sons and daughters of mystery, the darkness is at once the cloud of unknowing and the mother's womb.

Could it be that there is deep belonging and assurance of our belovedness somehow pulsing in the mysterious dark, because it gave us birth? Could it be, as Rilke writes, that "a great presence is moving near me." Could it be that Love walks with us most assuredly, in the dark?

The season of Advent, through which Christian practitioners now move, answers, "Yes."

The season of Advent is a solemn journey into the dark. And this movement into darkness is not a journey away from God, but rather toward her.

In the Christmas story, when God enters the world as a tiny baby (as God enters the world through every tiny baby), he does not come into a world already flooded with light; God is born into the waiting dark. God is not born in a bright palace, but in a dim barn. God, or Love, or Mysterious source, joins us, accompanies us in the dark. And advent marks this dark time of year as one of holy potential, expectant waiting, and spiritual transformation. It is a time to draw close to God, who is known in the darkness, as in the light.

In her article "Redeeming Darkness," renowned preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

There is one word for darkness in the Bible that stands out from the rest. It shows up in the book of Exodus, at the foot of Mount Sinai, right after God has delivered Torah to the people: "Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (20:21).

This is *araphel*, the thick darkness that indicates God's presence as surely as the brightness of God's glory.¹

¹ "Redeeming Darkness," by Barbara Brown Taylor. *Christian Century Magazine*, November, 2011. Accessed online at <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-11/redeeming-darkness>

Have you ever felt it? A presence in the thick darkness? Not of human form or being, but perhaps of energy, certainly of mystery, always of love. Have you ever journeyed into its unknown depths?

This advent, let us take some time to wander and to wonder in the dark, to uncover the truth within, to explore the mystery without, and to dream of the potential that breathes in the night.

May we walk courageously into the night, drawing ever closer to the holy, ever closer to our source of love.

I leave you with the words of the Phantom.

“Slowly, gently night unfurls its splendor / Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender / Turn your face away from the garish light of day / Turn your thoughts away from cold unfeeling light / And listen to the music of the night”