



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“In the Dark”

Jonah 2:1-10, Psalm 139

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Do you like darkness? Some people do. Some people don't. Some, like me, aren't quite sure. I don't like driving at night. I prefer to operate a car with the sun shining so I can clearly see both obstacles and landmarks. On the other hand, I like walking in the dark, without a flashlight or any other form of artificial illumination. I'm always amazed at how much I can see after the light has faded from the sky.

Darkness. That's where Jonah ends up in this morning's reading. The cold darkness found in the belly of a big fish. It's not his plan to end up in such a place. It's not God's plan either. Jonah's initial plan, as far as I can figure out, is to be left alone. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah and he catches the first boat out of town.

For Jonah, going to Nineveh is simply out of the question. It is the capitol of the Assyrian Empire, now known as Iraq. It is an empire that has been actively hostile to Israel. Jonah does not want any part of saving Nineveh.

He gets on the first boat heading out of town. Who does that? Fugitives from the law; people on the lam from the mob; dictators on the run; people who go to the bus station or airport or train station and don't care where the bus, plane or train is going as long as it is leaving soon. You do that only if you believe the one who is chasing you has a good chance of catching you.

As soon as the boat leaves the harbor, Jonah's plan falls apart. The text says, “The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.” The sailors—poor souls—start throwing out cargo—thinking that will help the situation. They soon realize that something else is at work. When Jonah reveals that he worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, the sailors are terrified.

But they are more than willing to help their passenger out of a tight spot and they row and row to try to get the boat out of danger but to no avail. Finally, it's time for Jonah to man up and jump overboard. As soon as he enters the water, the storm ceases. The boat and its passengers are safe; the sailors are saved. There is Jonah struggling to keep afloat. He is going to drown. But God saves him. If you call being swallowed by a large fish being saved.

All because Jonah tries to flee from the presence of God. Again, I ask, who does that?

Most of us, I think. Yeah, most of us have some experience of fleeing from the presence of God. We immerse ourselves in activities that look shiny and promising and we can spend months, years chasing after the next big thing. Some of us flee from the presence of God through drugs and alcohol. Some of us just keep super busy so we don't have to feel the gaping hole inside of us and, yes, we know what it means to flee from the presence of God.

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

According to this story, fleeing from the presence of God doesn't work out so well. Sooner or later, we end up being swallowed whole. Sooner or later, we find ourselves in a cold, dark place.

And, make no mistake, the belly of a fish is a dark place.

Are you familiar with the latest trend in restaurants, dining in the dark? It's what it sounds like. There are restaurants where dinners are served in complete darkness. The wait staff tend to be folks who are visually impaired. The idea behind these dining experiences is that, in the dark, our senses are heightened and we experience the tastes and smells and touch of the food in new and intriguing ways. These restaurants are growing in popularity. There was a one-night dining in the dark experience in Columbus in November. There's another one coming up in March.¹

Does dining in the dark sound appealing to you? It doesn't sound appealing to me. I like to see my food and, other than an occasional nighttime walk, I am all for avoiding the dark. In truth, the word "darkness" has become shorthand for anything that scares me, for anything I want to avoid. I suspect that I am not alone in darkness avoidance.

Back to Jonah. Something happens in those three days and three nights that he spends in the dark. You can hear it in his prayer. It's not a superficial, paint by the numbers, repeat after me prayer. No, it's a prayer that perhaps can be uttered only after a few days with no light.

He shares how hard it has been in the darkness:

My head was all tangled in seaweed
at the bottom of the sea where the mountains take root.
I was as far down as a body can go,
and the gates were slamming shut behind me forever...

And then he offers his thanks to God for saving him, staying with him.

Yet you pulled me up from that grave alive,
O God, my God!
When my life was slipping away,
I remembered God,
And my prayer got through to you,
made it all the way to [you].

The book of Jonah is very clear about this. God is in the fish. God is in the darkness. Psalm 139 is clear about that as well. God is in the absence of light. God is in that which is cold and dark. There is no place we can go where God is not present.

Maybe the darkness isn't as bad as we have been led to believe. Author Barbara Brown Taylor has written extensively on the spiritual benefits of darkness. She writes,

... 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

¹<http://www.blindness.org/events/7th-annual-columbus-dining-dark>

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.²

I think she may be right about that. Our lives are incomplete without darkness.

Unfortunately, the church has given darkness a bad name. From earliest times, we have used darkness as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. Visit almost any church and you can hear it. We pray, “Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness. Shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit, and protect us from all perils and dangers of the night.” We say things like that all the time.³

And, in doing so, we cover up an important truth. God does God’s best work in the dark. Some of the most meaningful worship services we experience in this place happen at night. Christmas Eve, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday. We are more open to God after the sun sets.

There is a part of the soul that stirs at night, when our defenses are down and our daylight distractions no longer protect us from ourselves. What we suppress in the light emerges clearly after nightfall. At such times, I know I find it easier to acknowledge my limitations and I am more open to God’s work in my life.

God does God’s best work in the darkness.

Jonah spends three days and three nights in a cold, dark place. Jesus will spend three days and three nights in a cold, dark tomb of death and, yes, God is going to do God’s greatest work in that place. God will reach into that tomb and pull out life and hope and forgiveness and a new beginning and all of this will happen while it is still dark.

So, I’m thinking that it may be time for a walk in the dark.

A full human life contains both light and darkness. Again Barbara Brown Taylor,

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 in it is to want half a life...⁴

It may be time for a walk in the dark.

You may already be in the dark. If so, don’t be afraid. You can see more than you thought possible. You will learn things about yourself that you can never learn while the sun is shining. Resist the temptation to take a flashlight. Experience all that the darkness has to teach you about yourself and about the world.

It may be time for a walk in the dark.

You will not be alone. God will be there with you.

Yes, it may be time for a walk in the dark.

Amen.

² <http://time.com/65543/barbara-brown-taylor-in-praise-of-darkness/>

³ <http://time.com/65543/barbara-brown-taylor-in-praise-of-darkness/>

⁴ <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2017/04/learning-to-walk-in-the-dark.html>