

## Sweet Darkness

When your eyes are tired  
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone  
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark  
where the night has eyes  
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure  
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb  
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon  
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.  
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds  
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness  
to learn

anything or anyone  
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

-- David Whyte from *The House of Belonging*  
©1996 Many Rivers Press



## In Praise of Darkness by Barbara Brown Taylor

April 2014, *Time Magazine*

**Christianity has never had  
anything nice to say about the  
dark.**

“Darkness” is shorthand for anything  
that scares me — that I want no part of  
— either because I am 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.

The problem is that there are so few people who can teach me about that. Most of the books on the New York Times “How-To” bestseller list are about how to avoid various kinds of darkness. If you want to learn how to be happy and stay that way, how to win out over your adversaries at work, or how to avoid aging by eating the right foods, there is a book for you. If you are not a reader, you can always find someone on the radio, the television, or the web who will tell you about the latest strategy for staying out of your dark places, or at least distract you from them for a while. Most of us own so many electronic gadgets that there is always a light box within reach when any kind of darkness begins to descend on us. Why watch the sun go down when you could watch the news instead? Why lie awake at night when a couple of rounds of Moonlight Mahjong could put you back to sleep?

I wish I could turn to the church for help, but so many congregations are preoccupied with keeping the lights on right now that the last thing they want to talk about is how to befriend the dark. Plus, Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. Visit almost any church and you can still hear it used that way today: 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.

Since I live on a farm where the lights can go out for days at a time, this language works at a practical level. When it is twenty degrees outside at midnight and tree branches heavy with ice are crashing to the ground around your house, it makes all kinds of sense to pray for protection from the dangers of the night. When coyotes show up in the yard after dark, eyeing your crippled old retriever as potential

fast food, the perils of the night are more than theoretical. So I can understand how people who lived before the advent of electricity — who sometimes spent fourteen hours in the dark without the benefit of so much as a flashlight — might have become sensitive to the powers of darkness, asking God for deliverance in the form of bright morning light.

At the theological level, however, this language creates all sorts of problems. It divides every day 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. 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, for “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

## Learn more

### Book discussion

Sunday mornings, 8:35 parlor  
December 7, 14, 21<sup>st</sup> OR  
Wednesday night, Dec 17<sup>th</sup>

### Advent Oasis

informal discussion  
Mondays at 8 a.m. Panera

