

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2021
John 12:2—33
It Was a Dark Night of the Soul
Rev. Sue Trigger

GOSPEL LESSONS

John 12:33

(CEB)

²⁰ Some Greeks were among those who had come up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made a request: “Sir, we want to see Jesus.” ²² Philip told Andrew, and Andrew and Philip told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. ²⁴ I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be. My Father will honor whoever serves me.

²⁷ “Now *I am deeply troubled*. What should I say? ‘Father, save me from this time’? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard and said, “It’s thunder.” Others said, “An angel spoke to him.”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “This voice wasn’t for my benefit but for yours. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment of this world. Now this world’s ruler will be thrown out. ³² The dark night of the soul is one of the hardest tests of our faith, and yet we seldom talk about it.” (³³ He said this to show how he was going to die.)

A few weeks ago I was working at the church late in the afternoon. I was startled when someone knocked on my office window. A gentleman was pointing to the logo on his shirt and asking me to open the door. I met him outside and learned that he was there to deliver some equipment to Pioneer Preschool. He was cautious, and asked who I was in order to make sure that I could authorize him to enter. I told him I was one of the pastors.

I have never met someone so excited to meet me. He shared that he had never met a female clergy person but he was honored. He said that he had been raised Roman Catholic and of course they don’t ordain women into the priesthood. He was genuinely thankful that there are churches that ordain women. Then he asked if he could share something very personal with me. Of course I agreed.

He shared that he is a Christian today, but it had been a long journey. He said that he was one of the “statistics” of the Catholic Church at the hands of his priest. His experience sent his life into a tailspin. He left the Catholic Church, he lost his faith and turned to alcohol and drugs. For many years he struggled with addiction and the loss of relationships, spiraling further and further down until he opened himself to Jesus and found a way back to faith. His journey was hard, but today he has a joy that exudes from his heart. He shared that he has found church with others who are fighting addiction or feel uncomfortable with the Church and he’s found a new life bringing hope and love to others.

It was one of those random conversations that felt anything but random. I sat in my car a moment after he drove away and gave thanks for the encounter.

One of the blessings I received that day was a personal sharing of his dark night of the soul. His story was humbling as I listened to the hurt he had experienced at the hands of a priest. You could see how deeply the priest’s violation cut into his soul. He not only lost faith in his priest, he lost faith in God. He was demoralized. A place that had held meaning in his life was taken from him. His life was disoriented, confused, and he turned to drugs and alcohol to relieve the stress. The deeper his addiction, the harder the struggle. That is a dark night of the soul.

In our adult Sunday school class we have been reading the book, “Learning to Walk in the Dark” by Barbara Brown Taylor. Taylor gives an entire chapter in her book to the dark night of the soul. She begins the chapter saying, “Like darkness itself, the dark night of the soul means different things to different people. Some use the phrase to describe the time following a great loss, while others remember it as the time leading up to a difficult decision. Whatever the circumstances, what the stories have in common is their description of a time when the soul was severely tested, often to the point of losing faith, by circumstances beyond all control. No one chooses the dark night; the dark night descends.”ⁱ

That’s where we find Jesus in today’s Scripture reading. “Now I am deeply troubled.” He said. This is a place where the English translation of the Bible has lost the

intensity of the original language. In the Biblical Greek, the word used here is *tarasso*, which means to cause severe sorrow or pain. That's much deeper than feeling troubled. Yes, Jesus was God with us, but he was also fully human. His body experienced the anguish of torture, his soul experienced the anguish of betrayal. He understood the dark night of the soul.

In case we have any doubts about this, we can fast forward to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus went to pray the night before he died. The gospel of Matthew says, "He was in anguish and prayed even more earnestly. His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground." This is not a literary tool to describe his anguish. There is a medical condition that explains what happened to Jesus. Hematidrosis (*hee mah tih drosis*) is a rare, but very real, medical condition that causes one's sweat to contain blood. The sweat glands are surrounded by tiny blood vessels that can constrict and then dilate to the point of rupture, causing blood to effuse into the sweat glands. The cause of hematidrosis is extreme anguish. In other gospels Jesus says, "my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." ([Matthew 26:38](#); cf. [Mark 14:34](#)).

Perhaps it was precisely because he knew what was ahead of him that he felt this level of anguish and there is much that we can learn from Jesus in this dark place. If only we are willing to take a look at it. But we don't like to. None of us like to. But what we lose by avoiding the reality of Jesus' dark night of the soul is the realization that existing in these dark places is not a sin, it is not a sign of weakness, it is not a burden we have to hide from others. Jesus did not hide his anguish from his followers, he shared it. He didn't try to ignore it as if the darkness was evil. When he went to the garden to pray before his arrest, he *sought* the darkness. He went off alone, into the night, to pray. We read the prayer in John 17 and assume that he prayed in order to find comfort and assurance from God. We read the list of things he prayed for, but I suspect that a prayer full of petitions was not the sole purpose. I suspect he also went off to just be and to wrestle with the reality ahead.

None of us have experienced a dark night of the soul like Jesus did, but we all have struggles in our lives. How many times have you struggled to sleep because of the things that worry you, things that cause you pain, stress, anxiety? Bills you can't pay, the health of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, the death of someone dear. How many times have you lay awake at night contemplating decisions that need to be made? Do I go to this school or that school? Can I afford to go to school? Do I marry this person? Do I pursue this medical treatment or choose to die? How many times have you lost sleep wondering if you are good enough? If God really exists? Have you wondered if something you're going through is a test from God or a punishment? Sadly, faith communities rarely equip people for moments like these. The dark night of the soul is one of the hardest tests of our faith, and yet we seldom talk about it. We tell people what to believe, to pray, seek the light and everything will be alright. We say things like "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." "All you need is enough faith and you'll get through this." These things rarely help, but can add to the anxiety. The dark night of the soul is one of the hardest tests of our faith, and yet we seldom talk about it.

Barbara Brown Taylor invites us into the darkness by reminding us that God is also in the darkness. That these times can be a time of transformation depending on what we decide to do with the moment. I want to be clear here, I am not speaking about the darkness that comes from mental health issues. They require professional care. If you are thinking that your life has no purpose or meaning and you are thinking of ending your life, please reach out to someone you know or call a suicide hotline. There is no shame in seeking help. Today what I am talking about is an existential spiritual wrestling. In his book, *Dark Nights of the Soul*, the psychotherapist and former Catholic monk, Thomas Moore, makes an important observation. He writes, "The dark night calls for a spiritual response, not only a therapeutic one." The dark night calls upon the affected person "to remain in the present, not bound or deluded by the past and not imprisoned in a fixed and defensive idea about the future...the most difficult challenge is to *let* the process take place, and yet that is the only release from the pressure of the dark night."ⁱⁱ

I think we may have touched on the reason that the Church has struggled with helping people deal with dark moments. I would love to be able to say here's what you need, pray this or pray that, believe this or believe that. But to prescribe how the process works is to take charge of the process, and what is needed is to let go of your control and just be. Let God be in control of the process. As Taylor says in her book, "One of the hardest things to decide during a dark night is whether to surrender or resist. The choice often comes down to what you believe about God and how God acts, which means every dark night of the soul involves wrestling with belief." No one can do that for you.

So as people of faith, what do we do with this dark night of the soul? What can we say that can have value for those times when we or a friend experience a dark night? We can encourage one another to not be afraid, and don't run from these moments, because as in these struggles is the potential to find new meaning in your life. The dark night of the soul can be a time self-discovery – the birth of a new sense of self. How do I know this? We read about the experiences of many in Barbara Brown Taylor's book, I witnessed it in the story of the delivery man. I've known it to be true in my own life, but most importantly, I know it because Jesus showed us. After he prayed in the garden he endured brutal torture and never turned away from it. He placed himself fully in his father's hands, even calling out in prayer as he breathed his last breaths. Oh, and there's one more thing he did. He gave up his life and spent three days in the darkness of a tomb where something profound and mysterious happened. He was transformed, resurrected into a new life. Out of the darkness came the promise of new life for us all.

ⁱ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. Harper One. Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY. Copy write 2014. P. 133.

ⁱⁱ 1. Moore T. *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Gotham Books; 2004.