

“The Charity of Night!”

By Steve Ramer

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Third Sunday of Advent, FCMF #2

Scripture

Isaiah 9, 59 and 60 (Selected verses)

Isaiah 59 Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom... We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us... Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.

Isaiah 9 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy... For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace... He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.

Isaiah 60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders... The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

Sermon

This morning I would like to reflect upon two very distinct and contrasting metaphors of light and darkness.

These two are not only powerful metaphors, but they are both so very central to the meaning of this season of Advent.

So many of those ancient “hopes and fears” were collected for us in the Old Testament, and that have become our Advent promises, include the great expectations of light not only piercing through but eventually overcoming all the darkness!

So many of the carols we sing at this time of year claim that that Holy Night, the very one when Christ was born, was a night that was clear, silent, glorious and dark!

The 12th century mystic and preacher, Meister Eckhart says,

“This birth takes place in darkness. And not only is the Son of the heavenly Creator born in this darkness, but you too are born there as a child of the same heavenly Creator and none other.”

His words lead me to wonder, was it merely a coincidence, that the very son of God, the savior of all creation, was born in the middle of the night?

And if this was intentional, what difference does it make?

Should this fact change our perspectives and actions when we come to this realization, that God not only comes to us in our darkest times, but to the realization that we too in fact, will realize our true birth in the darkest of times of our lives?

This second birth is our true birth according to Eckhart, and for this birth to happen we must be seeking, attentive to and open to the Word of God that constantly surrounds us.

And according to Eckhart, the darkness is essential,

“Because this Word is a hidden Word it comes in the darkness of the night. To enter this darkness put away all images and likenesses. In stillness and peace in this unknowing knowledge God speaks in the soul and becomes fully expressed there.”

Like a lot of things that mystics often say, you sometimes have to scratch your head and maybe read it several times before it sinks in!

My first response is, if something is truly hidden, wouldn't you have better luck finding it in the light of day?

Eckhart rather emphatically states, and I will defer to him when it comes to spiritual insight, that no, the best time to find the hidden Word is in the night time because, it is the night which possesses the essential elements that actually will more certainly guide us! And I would also like to note, that these “gifts” of the night tend to be the opposite of what our popular culture often encourages us to pursue.

Allow me to borrow the title of a Bruce Cockburn album and call this phenomenon, “The Charity of Night” Yes indeedly, the night can be charitable. And in those two, short sentences I read, Eckhart illuminates for us what only the night can offer.

First the night gives to us darkness!
Hopefully it can be enough darkness in order to hide
many of those images that distract our spiritual quest;
images of those things we may want to accumulate or possess,
or maybe hide the faces of those people who we resent or envy.

The night is also charitable because it can give us silence
and maybe some peace after a day filled with so much noise
and folks shouting for our attention, maybe things like;

“Fear the Moslems!” “Fear all Islam!”
Or “Sale, sale sale!” and, “Buy, buy, buy!”
Or that jerk who keeps honking his horn,
and shouting, “Speed up or get out of my way!”

Another gift of the night, is that as the darkness deepens,
our ability to see becomes more and more limited
and as we trust our eyes less and less,
our other senses of hearing, smell and spiritual intuition
begin to kick into a higher gear in order to compensate.
We then actually become more aware
and more attentive to what is around us on multiple levels.

First we become aware of all that we do not know.
We suddenly realize that so much was happening
around us only moments before that we were missing.
It is then that we become truly open,
open to the only sure thing that we must seek and know
and that is the presence of the Divine lover who created us!

Christmas carols also declare that the Night was also clear!
“It came upon a midnight clear!”
Really? How do we know it was really at midnight?
But anyone who spends time gazing at the night sky
will tell you that the darker the night, the brighter are the stars.
For those of us who have had the fortune to be in lonely
and remote places, far from the light pollution of civilization,
we know that the stars are far brighter and more distinct.

Whether it is lightening on the far horizon or even the artificial lights
beaming out to sea from some distant shore all sources of light can
become more visible when the background is pitch black.
And while the darkness of night can obscure our sight,
our eyes too will adjust and we will come to realize
that we can suddenly see both new and old things
with the newer clarity of a different perspective.

“Silent night, Holy night!” And with the fall of night,
much of the natural and artificial world suspends its animation.

At night, things tend to settle down
and the world around us becomes far less noisy!
But as we also know, even the natural world
does not fall completely silent as lots of critters
actually begin “waking up” only after the dark sets in.

So of course the night cannot offer us “pure” silence,
but it can afford us an opportunity for our eyes,
ears and especially our mind to have less to screen out.

And in my experience, the longer I sit in the “silence” of a lonely
and sometimes dark place, I find that I actually begin to hear, smell
and even see things that I didn’t realize were there,
or that I had missed during those busier times of my day.

Believe me I catch the irony when, as a preacher I say this,
that there are far too much sound and far too many words
and not enough silence in our world!

“Glo-oooo-oooo-oooooria!”

Now we modern humanoids have managed
to accomplish some very impressive things!

We can illuminate all our days and nights with the flood of artificial light.
We have even managed to nearly obliterate
most of the constellations in our night sky just so
we can shop at night and keep our casinos busier 24-7!
We have even captured lightening in a bottle relying more
and more upon nuclear energy to support our addictions
which similar to those other form of “moonshine”
we fail to count the potentially disastrous effects of our dependency.

One might surely be tempted to be impressed,
impressed at least until one also realizes the host
of truly important things that we have left undone!

And because of all that we have managed to accomplish
we have also managed to forsake the charitability of the night
throwing it away like so many pearls to the pigsty!
Robbed of the darkness and silence
we become dispossessed of the clarity and the glory it offers.
We wander aimlessly and without hope
while the Divine creator/lover calls to us
and waits for us in all those dark and silent places.

It is in the darkness, it is in the night,
that I believe we encounter what is truly true!
And it is there that we can realize completely
all that which we truly need and what we actually truly desire!

But sometimes we can only better comprehend something when it is placed in contrast with what is its opposite, or all that is fake, shallow and meant to be confusing.

The night can give us the time and space to tune, to train and to learn to trust all the senses that God has given to us. A multitude of senses, skills, sources of support and spiritual direction is of far better value in the long haul.

So am I stretching the birth narrative of Jesus too far when I apply this story as a metaphor for our own birth as well? Can we, should we, simultaneously celebrate “The Birth” and our own birth at the same time using the same motifs?

It would seem to me, that going from life in the maternal womb to life on land, metaphorically or otherwise, is likely one of the most powerfully transformative and joyous events that we can ever imagine!

So I guess I’m a “birther!”
A believer in the power of the transformation
and newness that being born can bring to each of us!

So what else then, other than a birth, can we find to even begin to describe what that potential encounter with our Divine Creator can be like?

An encounter with a the One,
whom an old hymn calls,
“Love all excelling, oh Love Divine!”

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