

## **“Darkness and the Light”:**

Sermon for Sunday, November 27th, 2011 by the Rev. Fran Mayes

We don't like the dark. The first thing we do when we walk into an unknown dark room is to start feeling for the light switch.

Dark literally means the absence of light, but we use it metaphorically to mean hidden, secret, grim, hopeless, even evil. He has a dark secret. She is in a dark mood. He practices the dark arts. The movie has a dark plot. I experienced a dark night of the soul.

Light is used positively to mean enlightenment, hope, cheerfulness. So its opposite must mean ignorance, despair, gloom. We think in terms of either/or, although much of our world is both/and.

It contributes, perhaps subconsciously, to racism. If dark is bad and light is good, what does that say about how we value people with light or dark skin color?

I would like us to think about the darkness in a different way this morning. Back in Genesis 1, the ancient story of how everything came to be, the first thing God calls out of the chaos, names into existence, is light. And God said, “Let there be light; and light was.”

God separates light from dark and calls light “day” and darkness “night.” Then the story goes on to say God called out waters and sky, land and sea, plants and animals, sun, moon, and stars, sea creatures and earth creatures, and finally, humankind, in God's own image.

After each act of creation the story says: God saw that it was good. It's good; It's good; It's good. It's all very good. All of it: Day and night, sea and land, plants and animals and people. It's all very good. Some of us call this Original Blessing.

For me this means that, in a sense, everything is sacred, everything has potential to be sacrament, because it's all made of God-speech. The world is full of wonders, if we open our eyes.

What's so scary about darkness? We feel lost in the dark; our senses that give us our orientation, our sense of where we are in the world, don't work very well, and that makes everything unknown.

Where am I? What lies ahead? Who or what might be lurking in the darkness? Will I be safe? How long will it be dark? Where is the way out? Is there a way out? Which way is forward? What obstacles are in my way?

Some of us are also pretty good at imagining that there are monsters in the dark unknown. But it's all very good, even the deepest dark night. Psychologist Karl Jung said that all of us have a shadow side, the parts of ourselves that we do not like.

Exploring our own shadow side is like going into a dark room full of furniture. If we panic and try to race through the room, we will bump into things, and may well get hurt. But if we stay still and wait for our eyes to adjust, we will begin to see what's in the shadows, so we can move through the room and avoid the obstacles.

The way out is always through. If we try to ignore or deny some part of who we are, we make ourselves sick. That which is repressed becomes obsessive. If I tell you not to think about elephants for the next 5 minutes, the harder you try, the more those darn elephants will invade your thoughts, until you're not thinking of anything but elephants.

We have to face our own shortcomings, mistakes, weaknesses, and challenges, our shadow side, in order to grow and mature and be whole. That can be one gift of the dark. Most of us sleep at night. We need sleep; we need rest; we need to dream. One tactic of brainwashing is to deprive the victim of sleep.

It's also a tactic of new babies, but all of us who are parents know that it's temporary; "this too shall pass." It's a good thing we fall in love with babies, or we would have little incentive to keep them!

When we are asleep, our brains sort things out, solidify memories, make sense of all that has happened during our waking hours. We rest and sleep better in the dark. The Bible is full of stories of God communicating through dreams and visions.

During the long cold nights of winter in this latitude, the world around us seems dead: no leaves on the trees, the ground under our feet is brown or gray, or covered with snow and ice, without signs of life.

But I planted tulips and daffodils this fall. Those dead-looking bulbs are growing roots in the darkness under the soil, preparing for what's ahead. I did that because I'm pretty certain Spring will come. I have faith that the Spring of new life always follows the cold dark Winter.

So here we are approaching the shortest days and longest nights of the year. This is a time when depression is endemic and suicides peak. The holidays seem to bring out the worst of our family dynamics, while fatigue and shattered expectations make things worse.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the part of the church year when we anticipate the birth of Jesus and the coming of the Christ. We join with other religious traditions to try to bring back the light.

Our long-ago ancestors, at least those in Europe, were never really sure that the sun would come back. Winter was a time of anxiety, deprivation and hard labor just to survive. They used rituals and rites to encourage the sunlight to return.

They celebrated when the days began to get longer again, bringing the promise that Spring would eventually come, so they could replant the fields.

Today, Buddhists and Hindus light candles and lamps to celebrate festivals of light in the winter.

Jews celebrate Chanukah, lighting one more candle each night for eight days to remember the time when God made the sacred lamps of the temple burn for eight days on one day's worth of oil.

Christians light another candle each week, as we anticipate Christmas. Even those who celebrate nothing more than Santa and Rudolph are hanging lights.

In the early church, Advent was a time of reflection and repentance in preparation for Epiphany, the visit of the Magi. Gradually the church picked up on the pagan celebrations of light around the winter solstice, and began to celebrate Jesus' birthday on December 25.

The season of Christmas used to take 12 days, the days between Dec.25, the birth of Jesus and Jan 6, the visit of the magi. In some cultures, Jan 6 is still the day for gift-giving. So we had four weeks to prepare for a birthday and twelve days to celebrate the birth.

So what have we done? I started seeing Christmas displays and hearing "Jingle Bells" before Halloween. I walked into a garden store in October looking for bone meal to feed my bulbs. The entire store was full of Christmas trees and decorations. A tiny section contained what must have been leftover gardening supplies from summer. No bone meal. It was already time to begin the great buying spree we call "the holidays."

Merchants call the Friday after Thanksgiving "Black Friday", because they hope the stampede of consumerism will turn their bottom line from red to black.

Some people started lining up on Monday to be first in line on Friday, which some stores started on Thursday, to buy electronics and other "door buster" specials.

People have been trampled trying to get into stores, and one woman sprayed the line ahead of her with pepper spray, so she could be first. Several people were hospitalized.

What does any of this frantic buying have to do with getting ready for a baby?

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not the Grinch. I enjoy the lights and colorful decorations of the season, and it's nice to hear the occasional carol or religious music in the shopping mall. The excitement of little children can be contagious.

But by the time Christmas comes around, I'm getting sick of it all. I don't want 12 days of Christmas; I want a nap.

Shopping, decorating, gift-wrapping, baking, cooking, and more shopping, are the order of the days. Busy, busy, busy. Worry, hurry, scurry.

Now if you are energized by all the glitz and glitter and the excitement of the crowds, good for you. You are an extrovert who gets energy being around other people. But for introverts like me, crowds drain energy. I renew with solitude and silence. None of this is right or wrong, it just is. Different strokes for different folks.

Many of us experience disappointment on Dec. 25, or whenever we celebrate, because we set ourselves up for failure by trying to design the perfect Christmas. Sorry Martha Stewart, most of us just will not pull that off.

Those of us who are particularly sensitive to the lack of sunlight may find ourselves wanting to go to some sunny place and lie on the beach, until the chaos settles down, and signs of Spring begin to appear.

Those who have loved ones who died around this time will experience anniversary grief. Those who are estranged from family will feel lonely. Those who are depressed will not have the energy to participate in all the excitement.

People who have longed for children and never had any will experience their loss at this time. People with a house full of children and not enough money to go around may feel that they have somehow failed as parents.

Where are the promises of Advent? Where can we find hope and peace and joy and love?

This time of year, the church is pregnant. The lectionary gives us readings from the prophets, anticipating new life. Isaiah complains that God's face is hidden, the people are in a mess of their own creation, and the prophet asks, "How long?"

But the most important word in the reading, the word of hope, is "Yet." Yet you are our Creator, our Parent. You are the potter, we are the clay. We are all the work of Your hand, God. We're your kids; we're your works of art.

In the middle of the muddle, there is God, still pregnant with us, still creating us. In the midst of depression, there is hope. In a world at war there is the peace that passes understanding. In grief and loneliness there is yet joy on the horizon.

When we feel abandoned, God is still in love with us. Unconditional love means that there is nothing you can possibly do that will cause God to love you any less.

And there is nothing you can do that will make God love you any more. If God had a refrigerator, your face would be on it.

In our dark nights of the soul, the light is on its way, dawn arises. This is the promise of Advent: new life is coming, the Christ will come again to us.

Now pregnancy isn't always comfortable. Numerous physical symptoms cause aches and pains and annoyances. And so much is unknown, even with today's modern technology, that allows us to see inside the womb.

We want the baby to be born, but we don't want to go through labor, not really. We don't know how long it will take, when exactly it will occur, what the baby will be like. We are anxious to hold our child in our arms, yet we don't want it born too early.

There is a phenomenon called "nesting" that happens near the end of pregnancy. Suddenly, the woman who has spent all her energy growing a baby and was too tired to even think about cleaning the house, is all about making a safe place for her baby to live in.

Cleaning, decorating, buying things, cooking and freezing meals for after the birth, trying to make everything "just right" before the big day. Kind of sounds like what we've done to Christmas, doesn't it?

I love the stories in the parts of Matthew and Luke before Jesus is born. Old, peri-menopausal Elizabeth gets pregnant by her husband who is, well, "far along in years." Not really up to this baby-making thing, if you get my drift.

Zechariah the priest is silenced. Elizabeth shouts for joy. "In the sixth month" the angel comes to Mary.

Is this the sixth month of the lunar calendar, in use at the time? No, it's not; it is Elizabeth's sixth month. Heaven tells time by her pregnancy. The angel tells Mary that she will be pregnant, and that her baby will be holy.

While Joseph is trying to decide what to do about Mary's pregnancy, Mary walks all the way to the hill country to visit cousin Elizabeth. Of course she does. She wants to get away from the village where all the tongues are wagging.

On her arrival, Elizabeth shouts: "You are blessed among women, and the babe in your womb is blessed! Why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me? The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, the babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy. But blessed is she who has believed that the promise of our God will be fulfilled." Blessed, blessed, blessed. Do you suppose Mary felt blessed as she fled toward Elizabeth's house? Unwed pregnant teenager in a culture where such "bad girls" could be stoned to death. Weary from the journey and experiencing the early pregnancy blahs.

Until Elizabeth calls her "Blessed." Blessed is she who has believed. Wait a minute, who is be-

ing blessed here? Doesn't "she who has believed in God's promise" apply to both women? Of course it does. They bless one another by sharing their lives with each other.

Mary learned to see her pregnancy and the coming birth in a new way. God's plan. She was part of the story of God's work in history. She wasn't in this alone. Miracles and wonders were happening all around her. Just as the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary's troubles weren't over. She was still a peasant girl in a country ruled by mighty and cruel Imperial Rome. Her baby would be born among strangers, without even a decent cradle to rest him in. In a dirty, smelly stable, no less.

But Mary had a new perspective on things. She trusted that the promise of God to her would be fulfilled. She didn't need to waste emotional energy wondering if the baby would survive, if she would have everything ready for him, if Joseph would support her. All she had to do was take care of herself and wait.

For those of us who are activists, which, I think is most of you, waiting is one of the hardest things we are ever asked to do. We want change and we want it now, or preferably yesterday. But Advent says, "Wait." Wait until the time is right.

The Christ will come. We will give birth to new life from within. We can relax and leave the timing to God. There are wonders all around us, if we only look and listen. Watch, says Mark. Watch and wait. You don't know when the Spirit will blow into you with new life.

You don't know when the Christ will show up, and you don't want to be asleep and miss it. Our experiences of God are often fleeting and unexpected. She plays peek-a-boo with us, just to see us smile.

Many of you know that I was pastor of Tree of Life MCC for 18 years. Metropolitan Community Churches is the denomination founded 41 years ago in Los Angeles to meet spiritual needs in the Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender communities.

Now we say LGBTIQA for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Questioning, Queer and Allies, because people don't fit very well into pre-determined categories. The world isn't either/or. It's not black and white. It's not shades of gray. It is a rainbow world.

We can talk about different colors. We say things like: orange is closer to red than it is to purple. Or I like green better than yellow. But we seldom claim that one color is better or more righteous than another. And what beautiful pictures we can paint when all the colors are exposed.

I closed Tree of Life MCC in April, almost exactly 18 years after it began. I grieve the loss of the group, and I miss the people who gathered each week for worship. But I know that God isn't finished with me yet.

I have no idea what God's plan for me is. I don't think I really want to know just yet, since a call usually comes with multiple responsibilities and challenges attached.

What I am trying to do is to remain alert for opportunities as they arise. I will always be a minister. I probably will not pastor a church again. But I look forward to the next phase of life with expectation, not dread. God is so full of surprises, I can't even guess what's next.

In the meantime I am honored to be part of this congregation. I'm excited about the potential for growth and service here. I may not be here every week, and I will probably never be Episcopalian, but if I've learned one thing over the years, it is that I never say never.

I don't know what God has up her sleeve, but I trust that Spring will follow Winter, new life will be born, Christ will come again, Alleluia.