

In last week's sermon I introduced our theme for this Advent—discovering the God who is manifest in darkness as well as in light.

And we noted that, in the first creation story from Genesis, darkness and light have complementary roles to play in the world God is bringing into being; that both are good.

But we also learned that often, in Scripture and in the dominant culture of the West, LIGHT has been associated with all that is good and right and true while DARKNESS has been associated with all that is bad and wrong and false.

So, this year's Advent invitation is to stay alert to ways of imagining darkness and blackness NOT as attributes to be shunned, but rather attributes to be hallowed.

And our case in point today comes from our first reading, EXODUS 19, where the newly liberated Hebrew children, three moons into their journey out of Egypt, cross the threshold into the wilderness of Sinai.

When MOSES first encountered the LORD at the BURNING BUSH (back in Exodus chapter 3), the LORD told Moses he was the one who'd been chosen to lead God's people out of captivity under Pharaoh.

God instructed Moses and said:

“I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship me on this mountain.”

God, you see, means to renew with Moses and the people the covenant God first made with Abraham.

Do you remember that fateful, ink-black night when Abram, worn out by waiting for his promised son to materialize, went toe-to-toe with God?

He marshalled all the evidence for why God's promise could not be fulfilled, whereupon God—hearing the despair in Abram's voice—switches tactics.

Coaxing Abram out from under his tent God says:

LOOK UP AT THE STARS—AND COUNT THEM IF YOU CAN.
SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.

And Abram looks up at the stars; sees the Milky Way—that great river of stars running across the nighttime sky—and finds his trust in the promise renewed.

Fast forward several centuries later and Moses and the Hebrew children are now poised to meet God at this pre-arranged rendezvous point at Mt. Sinai.

Listen to Barbara Brown Taylor set the scene:

“I am going to come to you in a dense cloud,” God says to Moses, “in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after...”

“On the morning of the big day the sky is alive with thunder and lightning, the whole top of the mounting is covered by a dark cloud, while the rest of it is shaking like a nuclear reactor about to blow. [The people are told to stay below – only Moses is allowed up the mountain, only he] will be allowed to survive a direct encounter with the divine.

“The darkness that dominates this story,” Taylor writes, “is an entirely unnatural darkness—both dangerous and divine—that contains the presence of the God before whom there are no others. It is so different from what other Hebrew words mean when they say “dark” that it has its own word in the Bible: ARAPHEL, reserved for God’s exclusive use.

“This thick darkness reveals the divine presence even while obscuring it... [it is a sign of God’s mercy, since ordinary human beings are not equipped to survive direct contact with the divine...”

“While this darkness is dangerous, it is as sure a sign of God’s presence as brightness is...the terrible and fascinating mystery of God.”¹ - BBT

“This darkness and cloud is always between you and God, no matter what you do,” wrote the medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, “So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love. For if you are to experience God or see God at all, insofar as it is possible here, it must always be in this cloud and in this darkness.”²

Poet Wendell Berry says it succinctly this way:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.³

Encountering God means moving beyond the LIGHT//DARK binary.

It’s as if, in this story of Moses’ encounter, God wants to make it clear that no attempts to pin God down—to transcribe how and where and in what form God can show up—will be tolerated.

God is beyond our knowing and will not be circumscribed.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2014) pp. 46, 47.

² Quoted by Taylor in *ibid*.

³ Wendell Berry, *Terrapin: Poems by Wendell Berry*.

Coming out of the experience of another exile—this one in Babylon 1,000 years after the Sinai encounter—God says through the prophet Isaiah:⁴

I AM THE LORD AND THERE IS NO OTHER.
I FORM LIGHT AND CREATE DARKNESS,
I MAKE WEAL AND CREATE WOE;
I, THE LORD, DO ALL THESE THINGS.

I've been captivated, as I've mentioned before, by what I've been learning from the new NOVA series THE UNIVERSE REVEALED.

One of those lessons is this: The places where stars are formed—the star nurseries, if you will—are the DARK regions of space where vast concentrations of interstellar gas and dust form dense molecular clouds.

In these murky, gas filled regions, where the temperature hovers near absolute zero, provide the ideal conditions for hydrogen and helium atoms to gradually bind together.

And here's the amazing thing:

Since these cloudy nurseries are so dark and dense, the stars forming within them remain invisible to us until they reach the point where the outward pressure from their expanding heat balances the inward force of gravity, and when that happens the stars are born and they break forth into visible light.

Darkness gives birth to light.

As Moses climbs the mountain to meet with God, the dark, thick cloud both reveals the divine presence and at the same time obscures it.

God, the story tells us, does choose to make himself known—but only on his terms.

When another emissary—one named John—makes his appearance in the wilderness five centuries hence, God's determination to hold his people close remains just as strong, but his tactics have once again changed.

The One he has sent will emerge from the cloud and into the light of day.

And every valley will be exalted and every mountain made low, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Amen.

⁴ Isaiah 45:5, 7 NRSV