

Our invitation throughout this Advent season is to discover God's presence in dark and light and shadow; and to stay alert to ways of imagining darkness and blackness NOT as attributes to be shunned, but rather attributes to be hallowed.

LET ME BEGIN TODAY WITH A STORY...

I was one of a dozen students on a geology field trip with my 8th grade science class. We had just arrived at the entrance to a vast underground complex of limestone caves when our guide stopped to ask one simple question.

IS ANYONE AFRAID OF THE DARK?

This was no joke. He told us that when we arrived at the mid-point of our underground tour—the point furthest from the entrance and exit tunnels—he would be turning off the lights and we would experience **absolute darkness**.

In absolute darkness if you wave your hand in front of your face, you'll detect nothing. No shadow, no hint of movement, nothing.

And no matter how long you keep your eyes opened in that darkness, they never adjust, your sight never becomes adapted.

In order to adapt, the eyes need some inkling, some trace of light, however small or distant. Down there, there would be none.

Our orientation complete, we descended into the caverns.¹

- We saw stalactites hanging from the ceiling and stalagmites growing up from the floor.
- We saw formations named by the cave's previous explorers: the wishing well, the falls, the last room.
- We saw pure pools of water that had fallen as rain on the surface above eons before.

And then came the moment we had all secretly been waiting for—the moment when the lights would go out.

Our guide stopped and turned toward us, then, giving us a warning, he flipped the switch, and we were engulfed in total darkness.

After a moment, our guide spoke, and as he spoke, a dozen pairs of eager ears and useless eyes homed in on his voice.

I can't tell you exactly what he said, but I sure remember listening!

¹ Go to this link for more information and photos: <http://www.niagaracave.com/album.asp>

In the opening lines from 1st Samuel, the author paints a picture of the darkness and silence that has engulfed Israel.

- It is night, and Eli, whose eyesight is failing, is lying down in his room.
- A word from the LORD, we learn, has grown rare in those days.
- The lamp of God is flickering, but has not yet gone out.
- And young Samuel, too, is lying down, near the ark of the covenant.

The boy doesn't know it, but the experience he's about to have will signal a turning point in Israel's history.

Night may have descended, yet this night is pregnant with possibility.

It HAD to come AT NIGHT—this encounter with the DIVINE that's about to happen—because it's AT NIGHT that the distractions which occupy our days are laid aside.

It's AT NIGHT that dreams take root; AT NIGHT that the EGO at last relinquishes the driver's seat while the UNCONSCIOUS mind takes the wheel.

Artist Marc Chagall captures something of this in his etching on the front cover of our bulletin today.

This shift to the subconscious mind simply can't happen in the light of DAY—when the conscious mind is preoccupied with all that's taking place around us—all the DATA being piped into our brains through our senses.

No, it's only AT NIGHT, when the constant, conscious data flow slows, that another stream of communication comes to the fore.

This is the rich world that Swiss psychiatrist CARL JUNG discovered a century ago. A world full of symbols packed with meaning, delivered to us in the language of dreams.

Our lives, said Jung, are guided by subconscious, ruling images which he called archetypes. These archetypes—such as the hero, the virgin, the sage, the trickster, and the God image—occur in different ways, in different cultures throughout the world, and they form part of what Jung calls “THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS.”

“These fundamental patterns” Jung uncovered, “show up in dreams and behavior in every culture, fascinate the soul, and appear in symbols and stories that go as far back in time as we can go.”²

² Richard Rohr

At his young age, Samuel seems to possess the gift of ready access to this world; an intuitive openness to this sacred realm.

**But he has no words for this experience yet.
He needs a mentor, a guide, to help him along the way.**

And though Eli is not as tuned-in to God's presence as he once was, by the 3rd time Samuel comes in and wakes him, Eli finally understands what is going on.

And he tells Samuel, **Go back to bed**; and if you hear the LORD calling you again, say: "SPEAK, LORD, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING."

And so begins a relationship between Samuel and the LORD that will reshape Israel's story forever. For it is Samuel who will anoint Israel's first king, SAUL, and who later will anoint Saul's successor – DAVID.

Do you believe in the power of dreams? Do you believe that dreams can hold meaning? Do you believe in the possibility that God may whisper something to you in the night as he once did to Samuel?

Some of us here know what it's like to have strange, epic dreams.

Others of us may feel that we don't have much of a dream life at all.

And still others of us can recall dreams that moved us deeply—and that are still vivid in our memories even though they happened long ago.

A DREAM I had during a difficult time in my life was that kind of dream for me.

I was driving my car at night, on a one-lane mountain road, in the middle of a blinding snowstorm.

The road ahead was unfamiliar. I didn't know the way forward and I couldn't go back.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, a snowplow appeared in my rearview mirror. It swung around in front of me and moved forward, slowly plowing the road ahead.

I fell in behind the plow, let go of the steering wheel, and allowed my car to be carried along, I knew not how. A deep sense of well-being came over me.

I knew that everything would be fine as long as I stayed behind that plow!

When Jung was asked at the end of his life if he “believed” in God, he replied, “I could not say I believe. I KNOW! [For] I have had the experience of being gripped by something that is stronger than myself, something that people call God.”³

“We all must find an inner authority that we can trust that is bigger than our own,” writes Richard Rohr. “When we are able to trust God directly, it balances out the almost exclusive reliance on external authority.”

“Much of what passes as religion ... operates from the outside in. Jung wanted to teach people to honor religious symbols... from the inside out. He wanted people to recognize those numinous voices [that exist] in our deepest depths.”

“If it is absurd to believe that human beings can be reached and touched by the dynamism that lies at the heart of the universe,” writes Morton Kelsey, “then dreams have little or no religious meaning. They may be at most a help in unraveling the tangled web of one's personal life, but they have little or no meaning beyond this.

“If, however, humankind is open to another dimension of reality, then the DREAM may be one of the most common avenues through which God reaches out to us. Then, dreams should be taken very seriously.”⁴

Samuel was not afraid of the dark.

He learned that dreams in the night are one method God uses to get our attention, and that they should be taken very seriously.

The invitation in his story is to understand that the VOICE which spoke to him that night is a VOICE that calls to us, too.

Amen.

³ Quoted in R Rohr

⁴ *Dreams: A Way to Listen to God*