

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 11 December, 2016

Come Darkness

Come darkness, come light
 Come new star, shining bright
 Come love to this world tonight,
 Alleluia!

Come broken, come whole,
 Come wounded in your soul,
 Come any way that you know,
 Alleluia!

Come doubting, come sure,
 Come fearful to this door,
 Come see what love is for,
 Alleluia!¹

Come Darkness, Come Light: That's singer-songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter, lifting up not just the light, but the darkness. I hear I'm not alone in my wingeing over how dark it is these days. Today, just 9 hours and 7 minutes of daylight ... and then, slowly but surely, we lose four more minutes – dark and getting darker – until it's the darkest of dark on December 20th.

Sarah Williams concludes her poem *The Old Astronomer to His Pupil:*
 Though my soul may set in darkness,
 it will rise in perfect light;
 I have loved the stars too fondly
 to be fearful of the night.²

¹ Mary Chapin Carpenter, *Come Darkness, Come Light*

² Sarah Williams, "The Old Astronomer to His Pupil," in *Best Loved Poems of the American People*, Hazel Felleman, ed. (Garden City Publishing Company, Garden City, NY: 1936), pp. 613-614. As Sarah Williams wrote it, this two lines of poetry, not four.

Is it fear? I don't think so. It's just so depressing to get up in the dark, to drive home in the dark.... Or *is* it fear?

Theology professor, author, and preacher Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes about going out at night to collect eggs from her hens. They're more peaceful, then; the work is easier. She writes, "I knew the henhouse so well that I did not bother to take a light. I just went in, said hello to the hens, and started feeling around in their laying boxes for the day's yield.

"There was a little moonlight coming in through the window, which I admired while I felt around in the first box. I found three eggs: a perfect handful. After putting them in my apron, I stuck my hand in the second box and felt something cooler than hay. Maybe it was a piece of plastic that had gotten baled by mistake. That had happened more than once. So I kept feeling around for eggs – only there were not any, and when I touched the cool thing again it moved, uncoiling itself until I could see the head of the big black snake in silhouette, sliding noiselessly through a hole in the chicken wire."³

Okay, maybe it's fear.

Which is not to mention what we, as a society, do with metaphors for darkness: dark nights, dark thoughts, dark emotions. And we've done an excellent job making sure there's plenty of light in our lives – so much light that The Milky Way is now invisible to two thirds of people living in the United States. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "If this doesn't bother you, that may be because you have never seen it stretched out above your head like a meadow of smallest stars. Lie down in it, even with your eyes, and you risk wondering things that will make you dizzy for days. Where does that path of stars lead? Where does the cosmos end? What lies beyond it, and who are you to wonder about such things? If you are ever in doubt about your place in the universe, this is a good way to remember."⁴ We've sacrificed the gifts of darkness for our love affair with light; journalist and essayist Barbara Mahany writes, "we've blinded ourselves to the darkness."⁵ We're

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 56

⁴ Taylor, *op cit*, p. 59-60

⁵ Thanks to Art Nava for Barbara Mahany, *The Invitation of December*. Please see onbeing.org/blog/the-invitation-of-december/7114

enchanted by *enlightenment*, how many of us wax eloquent about *en-darkenment*?⁶

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American philosopher Ken Wilber writes about religion as having two functions: The first function of religion is *translation*: translating what happens to us and offering us ways of making meaning of what unfolds in our lives. The second function of religion is *transformation*: not to comfort us, but to undo us a little ... or a lot. Transformation doesn't sell well, because, well, who wants to be undone? But, he says, if we try to live on the spiritual equivalent of fast food – all comfort, no challenge – we'll starve.⁷ Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."⁸ "There is no filling a hole that was never designed to be filled, but only to be entered into."⁹ Doesn't the spiritual path always lead back to this? *Endarkenment*: If we're willing to sit in the dark and wait and listen, there is wisdom.

But, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When they can't see where they are going; when the bottom drops out; when their prayers go unanswered and they're marooned in the kind of darkness that makes them afraid to move ... so many people [believe] that if they can just keep their minds focused on the light of the world, then sooner or later [G*d] will send them some bright angels to get them out of there...."

"[But, she says,] there is an equal and opposite truth that almost never comes up in church, though it is well attested in scripture: G*d dwells in deep darkness. G*d comes to people in dark clouds, ... dark dreams, and dark strangers in ways that sometimes scare them half to death but almost always for their good.... G*d does some of G*d's best work in the dark."¹⁰

"I say, celebrate the darkness," adds Barbara Mahany "– landscape of discovery, of finding our way only by engaging, igniting, heightening our

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor's word, *op cit*, p. 86

⁷ Ken Wilbur, *One Taste*, p. 27

⁸ quoted by Miriam Greenspan, "The Wisdom in Dark Emotions," in *Shambhala Sun*, January 2003, p. 1

⁹ Ken Wilbur, *op cit*, p. 27

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Entering the Dark Cloud of G*d*, preached at the Festival of Homiletics, 2014

deeper senses, the senses of the heart and soul, the intellect, and the imagination.”¹¹

“.... When we cannot see,” Barbara Brown Taylor continues, “— when we are not sure where we are going and all our old landmarks have vanished ... — then plenty of us can believe we are lost when the exact opposite may be true. Based on the witness of those who have gone before, the dark cloud is where G*d takes people apart so they can be made new.”¹²

It’s good stuff, but it doesn’t sound like very much fun, does it? The point is not to stay in the darkness — like the earth, very soon, we, too, can tilt back toward the sun. But when we have no choice — right now, for example — we would do well to be curious and courageous, enter in, and go deep. “What can [we] learn about [our] fear of it by staying with it for a moment before turning on the lights? ... What have [we] learned in the dark that [we] never could have learned in the light?”¹³ Again, the point is not to stay there — and if we don’t find ourselves tilting back, there are good doctors and good medicine to course-correct the chemistry of our brains. But for now, we can choose to be in the dark, and, instead of wishing it away, just be here. And that may be a very powerful choice, indeed: we just might find ourselves in the dark.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Maybe there are eggs in the henhouse
and maybe there’s a snake.

Yes, fear
and transformation:
not to comfort us, but to undo us.
And yes, the Milky Way
and maybe even G*d.

May we be curious and courageous,
enter in and go deep:
endarkenment.

I am so grateful
to be in the dark with you.

¹¹ Barbara Mahany, *op cit*

¹² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Entering the Dark Cloud of G*d*, preached at the Festival of Homiletics, 2014

¹³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 185