

From Darkness to Light – The Circadian Rhythm of God’s Love

Scriptures: Genesis 1: 14-19, Matthew 5:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-12

There we were in complete darkness. Our little tour group in the jungles of northern Australia had just descended into a cave below the ground, and, after “oohing’ and “aahing” at the natural beauty around us in the cave, the guide had simply said – “now we’re going to turn off all the lights”. All the electric lights and our headlamps were turned off. We were plunged into absolute darkness. It was so absolute, that whether your eyes were open or closed, you couldn’t tell the difference. You could raise your hand to touch your nose, and you were surprised when your finger touched your face, since you had no idea where it was. Absolute black - extremely disconcerting for some, a little exhilarating for others. The tour guide had warned anyone with claustrophobia or afraid of the dark not to come with us and wait at the cave’s entrance. For those that came with the group, I think some of them learned for the first time that they were a little claustrophobic or afraid of the dark when the lights went out with such stunning results. Our tour guide told us that, during earlier times, Australian authorities would throw prisoners in the cave, and close the entrance, with no source of light for days. Most of the prisoners went mad. I completely understand why. A complete absence of any light, not knowing the difference when your eyes were open or closed, would require some mental stamina to withstand for any length of time. So there we were in the darkness and the tour guide said he would turn a single small light. It was a little pin prick of light, but being the only light in the cave, all of our eyes were immediately drawn to it, as if our brains craved the light after being thoroughly blind. For some, this was a huge relief.

I sometimes wonder if, before the Earth was formed, before there was anything in our solar system or even the universe, that the thorough blackness we experienced in that cave was what the pre-formed universe was like. It makes the creation story in Genesis 1 seem so much more real.

Genesis 1: 1-5:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Notice though, that in the scripture God does not name the darkness as bad. God began work when it was dark. God names the light Day and names the darkness Night. That's right, it's got a name. Darkness has got a name from God. So why are we afraid of it? It wasn't named "evil play time" or "devil visitation hours"; it wasn't named "don't walk outside now time" or "drug dealers' peak business hours" - just "night". Furthermore, in the passage that was read earlier, God creates lights to separate the day from the night; to rule the day and night –one for greater in the day, one lesser in the night, and the stars. 1 Gen. 17: "God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth to rule over the day and over the night, to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good." That's right – God saw that it was good. It's good to have night – it's OK to have darkness. We all know that night is just as important as day. Life on earth depends on the daily rhythm of light and dark – in biology, it's known as the circadian rhythm. Life on earth came *after* the night/day cycle was already created. And our bodies need it – for sleep, allowing for natural recovery. Animals need it – both the nocturnal ones and the diurnal ones. Even many plants and other forms of life survive because of the periods of darkness. Darkness and night are not inherently evil, any more than light and day are inherently evil. Both are created equal, and both are good and needed. In fact, everything that follows in creation started after night and day were already in place. Our place in the story of God is dependent on God's creation of the night/day cycle. God's message to humankind of a creating, saving and loving God takes place within that cycle.

And it starts with the night. Before there was Light there was Darkness. Creation started with darkness. Notice the order in the Genesis 1 creation story. The daily cycle starts with evening. Every day is the same. "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. " The Jewish day *begins* at sundown. The Sabbath *begins* at sundown. It seems as if before we become active, we start with evening, and focus on God then. God's day starts with the evening. Our "day" starts with the evening. The message of God's activity begins with knowing God in the darkness. While God's love for us exists throughout the 24 hour cycle, it starts in darkness. It doesn't just exist for us when we happen to be awake. We are expected to deliver a complete message of God's saving activity that affects all of creation – both the night and the day. And our freedom as having been created in God's image is to act as "free moral agents" as David Schroeder puts it. We are to do the right things at night and the right things during the day. We have the ability to choose the message of God as our guide to life; we can choose to honour the cycle of Night and Day. How we live through that entire cycle demonstrates how we have chosen to honour God. Have we really turned the world so upside down that we have treated

only half of our activity – our daytime activities, as somehow worthy of God’s message? Evil is agnostic to the circadian cycle. Evil wants to rule over the night and day, just as God wants to rule over our night and Day. In fact, God so much wants to rule the entire cycle that God created lights to rule both aspects of that cycle. Our time during Darkness is just as sacred as our time in the Light.

Note how God seems to have brought important messages during the night.

- During Israel’s enslavement in Egypt, God sends a plague of darkness to show Gods strength – that’s right, one of God’s “are you listening to me?” messages is a plague of darkness.
- At the start of Passover, to protect Israel from the death of the first-borns, the slaughter of the lamb used to mark the doorposts occurs at twilight – the beginning of the Jewish day.
- God passes through Egypt at midnight.
- In the story of the calling of Samuel, God calls Samuel’s name while Samuel is sleeping during the night
- In Jesus’ birth story, God speaks to Joseph during his sleep in a dream.
- When the angels appear to the shepherds, the shepherds were “keeping watch over their flock by night”. And the glory of the Lord shone around them.

God repeatedly, and sometimes in dramatic fashion, comes to us during the night – when we aren’t active, when we aren’t distracted. It’s almost as if God wants us to start by listening to the message at night before we start acting during the day. “You want to learn God’s language, get the recordings and listen to them while you sleep. Call 1-800-HEAR-GOD now, and make the night work for you. “ We do need to start by listening to God before we sleep on it, and before we start our daylight activities. We need to re-enter that cave in complete darkness, and listen to God at work, listen to the message God provides to us, before we can receive the Light and enter the story of the Light.

And this message God is providing is one of constancy. Just as night becomes day and turns to night again, so is the story of the love of God constant. The message of God’s love was there before Light was even created for the world. It was there before we existed. And it will exist after we are gone, and our lights are all out again.

So if the message is ready and constant - it was there before light began, before we showed up, and it’s going to be there long after we’re gone, long after the lights are out - it means that we don’t own or control the message. We’re simply expected to share it. The word Paul uses in the passage in 1 Thessalonians is “entrusted”.

Entrusted: to confer a trust one; especially to deliver something in trust to; to commit to another with confidence.

Paul saw himself as being entrusted to carry God's message. Now Paul, along with his brothers in Christ, Silvanus and Timothy had been accused of having impure motives in preaching the Gospel of Christ. He refers to his treatment in Philippi, where they had been driven out by people there, after being flogged and imprisoned, according to the account in Acts 16.

Here Paul defends their position saying that they do not have impure motives, nor are they preaching with deceit or trickery in their hearts, nor seeking praise. They came to the Thessalonians in love, "being gentle among you, like a nurse (or nursing mother) caring for her own children." (1 Thess. 2:7) And, I might add, nurses do work night and day; just as parents caring for their children don't just do it during the day. We care for others, like a nurse, or a loving parent, just as God loves and cares for us night and day. Living as Christ we follow Jesus' example not by seeking mortal praise or our own gain; we do it because of the commandment to love God and one another. We are entrusted to deliver it in honesty, caring for the recipient. What we do is a witness...Sharing the love of God is something God trusts us to do. The message isn't created by us; it is already there for us to share.

So then, here is our challenge. How are we to share this message, giving of ourselves night and day; with our whole selves? This is not a simple matter of speaking. It's dedicating our lives to living out the gospel in ways that are real, tangible and demonstrate that we too have received what we are also passing on. Paul states in the Thessalonians passage in verse 8 and 9 "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God."(1 Thessalonians 2:8-9)

Caring, sharing ourselves. It's not a matter of simply speaking the word; it is living the word, night and day. This is what we are called to do. This is how we are called to be the church. Being the church means teaching and serving. Mennonite Church Canada Witness works at exactly that, for example - being the church in different areas of the world. Witness works in partnership with what God is already doing in other parts of the world. This is not the old paradigm of sending missionaries out to preach and convert. It is working where the church is already working, finding the constancy of God and helping it to flourish where it is already at work, so we can:

Form a people of God

Become a global church

Grow leaders for the church

...so that God's life-giving message is self-sustaining and nurturing those connected to it. We don't do this to seek praise for ourselves, or to build an empire that serves our own interest, but rather to help share the message of a redeeming God, a message entrusted to us. We as the church today are blessing of BockKi and Sook Kyoung as they prepare to enter a life of service with Mennonite Church Canada Witness. We and God are entrusting the message with them and they, in response, are prepared to give of their gentle selves, night and day, for the love of God. In this way, Bock Ki and Sook Kyoung are joining other Witness workers already working in different parts of the world, already partnering and sharing of themselves.

Now then, as the church, *we all* are called to this ministry of love, night and day. As in our theme passage in Matthew – “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Gathered and scattered, whether here in Toronto during the night or in Korea where it is daytime, we are called to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace. Note that “growing” refers to something that has already started. We didn't plant the seed - God did that before we even knew it was there. God did that out of darkness, and in the darkness, when God created Light for the world. If we truly want to honour God's night/day cycle – the circadian rhythm, we need to begin by honouring the darkness in the night, and listen to God starting at that point, so that we can receive the Light when it's created and shared with us. And the message in that cycle, in that love for creation, isn't even one in which have controlling ownership. It is simply there for us to share widely, without malice, deceit or impure motives. This message of love, in darkness and in light was there before we came along, and it will continue to exist in the life God grants to future generations. The message of the love of God has been entrusted to us. I'm reminded of what we say during child dedications - that this child is not ours, but has been entrusted to our care by God. It is our mission to nurture that life with the love of God. We need to respect the circadian rhythm of God's love that started in darkness. Respect it, listen to it, accept it, live it and share it.