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**Dark** - Genesis 1:1-2 (Psalm 18; Psalm 139; John 1)

There are at least three important things that are defined, not by what *is*, but by what *is not* – by the absence of something: cold is the absence of heat; vacuum is the absence of substance; and dark, the absence of light.

Nighttime, when the sun is absent from our sky, is, and probably always has been, a time of fear and anxiety for people. Those of us who have the gift of sight, when we can't see, rely on our other senses, which feels unnatural; and our instincts go on high alert - unless, of course, we know that we are safe - or if we're using the dark as a tool. Part of our fear of the dark is because night is when those who want to conceal their deeds ply their trade: animals, criminals – scary things - and others who use the cloak of darkness to their advantage.

Of course, there is more to the dark than just the absence of light. "Dark" is a word we use to describe many things that we dislike, cannot control, or are just afraid of. The great preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes in her book "Learning to Walk in the Dark": "Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me - either because I am sure that I do

not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love. At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

Did you catch the turn in the middle of her words? “Dark” and “darkness,” as she grew older, wiser, and closer to God (and after a great deal of careful reflection), something that – while it still provokes fear – became, for her, a tool of deep self-revelation, even salvation.

You see, the dark is not truly the enemy we instinctively consider it to be. It can’t be. And not just because Barbara Brown Taylor or I say so: it has been, in fact, from the beginning, at least according to the account of Genesis 1.

Look again at those two verses, a bit awkwardly cut off in this translation. The breath of God, swirling, dancing over the waters at creation, before there was something called light... The waters, sometimes called the waters of chaos, but in fact the stuff of which creation came, *and* the darkness that permeated the pre-creation

universe, serve as the stage that the wind, the breath, the spirit of God (remember, they're the same word in Hebrew) strode out upon to open the great cosmic show that began the beginning.

The first chapter of John's Gospel, which gives our Christian perspective on creation, says that darkness was and is something that simply *is*: the absence of light, yes; but God's darkness includes his presence. "The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light (which we know as Christ) shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not extinguish it." (Jn 1:9, 7)

There is an alternative way to see the darkness that surrounds us, both literally and figuratively, and we need to understand it, because the dark is there, and because it threatens us, instinctively.

That instinctive fear is *not* the deep view of Scripture. The Bible teaches us that nothing is beyond or stronger than the reach, knowledge, or presence of our loving God. Passage after passage of Scripture sings this same song: the Psalms - "If I said, 'The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me,' even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you!" (Ps 139:11-12) "I called to [God] for help, and my call reached his ears... God made darkness cloak him; his

covering was dark water and dense cloud. God's clouds went ahead of the brightness before him..." (Ps 18:6b, 11-12a)

But darkness is the place of fear, of uncertainty; of not being able to see, of not knowing. Have you ever found yourself in a place so dark you literally could see nothing? It triggers at least anxiety, even panic, in most of us; we are lost.

Yet not for God. These opening words of Genesis hold the antidote to our fear of darkness, if we can somehow find the ability to trust that God truly is Lord of the dark as well as the light: dark *is* what was before anything but God *was*. It cannot have been evil; it was before evil. It was the empty slate on which the waters of creation wrote life, by the breath of God.

And the people of God before us knew this. How do we know? Because, for the Hebrews, even for practicing Jews today, each day begins not with the dawn, but with evening, the setting of the sun.

Night was not to be a time of peril, but a time of rest, of allowing God to restore and refresh our spirits for the activities we are to be about in the daylight to come.

Now, really, we've just been talking about physical dark, the absence of literal light. That's a quality of literal night; but it works for *spiritual* night as well. That's what Barbara Brown Taylor was driving at: not so much physical darkness as the gloom that invades our soul.

The great mystic, John of the Cross, wrote about this in a way that has resonated through Christian spirituality for centuries: he wrote of something called the Dark Night of the Soul.

The Dark Night of the Soul is when God seems to have left the building, a time when, in our heart of hearts, we cannot find what we once knew to be God in us, in others, anywhere. It can be a crisis of faith; reaction to tragedy; a loss of trust in God's care for us – it comes in different ways to each of us different children of God. It may come repeatedly; it may seem like a curse laid on us.

It can come on you suddenly: an abrupt sense of emptiness, that a part of your very being has been taken from you, a hole in your soul that can't be filled. It can be a sense that something you once took for granted is missing, something you can't quite put your finger on. It can just be an inner emptiness, or a deep foreboding.

Some find this is the pit of depression - a pit which can seem to have no floor, which is pitch black on the brightest noonday, and which can rob us of life if we let it, as it did to Robin Williams and does to tens of thousands of us rich, well-fed, comfortable Americans every year.

Some find this dark night in the despair that comes with catastrophe, with great or even small personal loss, helplessly watching the spread of pandemics, wars, senseless tragedy; the death of children, divorce, just that awful cloud of death that waits to envelope each of us eventually. The ultimate dark.

John of the Cross describes this darkness as a sense of the absence of God, that God has withdrawn from us, that our spirit has been left to itself. The writers of the Psalms talk about this, too, over and over. Jesus even quotes one on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But. But! If darkness is the very stuff that God breathed into to make his masterwork of you and me, then even in the dark, there is God; the God who is light, without any darkness at all remains the God of the darkness, who can and does use the dark to fashion the bright things of the spirit.

Very few make the journey through the arc of life from birth to death without experiencing darkness. Perhaps you have, too. It is not pleasant; it seems wasteful and even counterproductive. It is an awful, soul-wrenching feeling to confront what seems to be pitch black, limitless darkness, which is only a pitifully inadequate way to describe the pain and sense of abandonment that is depression.

Now, I’m not suggesting for a second that all you need to overcome depression is more faith. Rather, that God still walks with us in our dark times, through our darkness.

If our God is who we believe God to be, the one who is Lord of everything and who loves us to the point of dying in his Son Jesus Christ to love us back into his arms, then there can be no other answer, whether you can hear it today in the depths of your own dark or not: God is Lord

of the Dark, and will, if we can only let him work his divine mastery, make our personal dark into the light which will never end, the light of the Kingdom.

We may define dark as the absence of light, but never as the absence of God.