

Sermon: Opaque Splendor Text: John 8:1-12 April 29, 2018

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON - Rev. Steve Clifton

In my later years of high school I was on a search committee for my church. I was one of 2 young people in a group of 10 congregants who helped look for a new minister. One of the things we did was to travel to different churches to see prospective preachers in action. And one of the churches we visited was very different in how they worshipped. It was a big cathedral church in downtown Hamilton. They lit candles on their communion table to start worship and in the last 70s nobody did that. After the service everyone mentioned the candles being lit. It made a big impression. I don't remember the minister that we went to see.

Thinking back on the churches of my youth, none of them lit candles in worship. Candles fell out of favour in many Protestant Churches many years ago because they were seen as "Papist"- too Catholic. But in recent years candles in the United Church have made a comeback.

We use candles in Advent to counter the growing darkness of December, to mark the coming of the light that will dawn at Christmas. We use candles to symbolize the light of Christ that shines in each child as they are baptised among us. We light candles at the Encarna worship installation and scatter them through the sanctuary to create a sense of sacred space. We light a candle at each Council and elders meeting to remind us of the presence of Jesus as we gather. We light a candle of remembrance at funerals to remind us that the light that shone in the life of our loved one still shines, shine in us. We light our candles on the communion table at the beginning of every service. We are a chatty, social group and the candles being lit draws us together, helps us to be ready when worship begins.

Candles have been reclaimed and isn't that a good thing? If we banned them from our life wouldn't something be lost? We could use light bulbs and flip a switch. Our meditation group could gather around an LED flashlight. There is something about a candle flame that is special. Its flicker, its radiance...A candle presents us with something visceral, primal...

On Good Friday this year we marked the day with a Tenebrae service. This ancient monastic liturgy centers on extinguishing candles. As the story of Christ's passion unfolds, candles are snuffed out one by one and the darkness grows as Christ's death draws near,

At the point of crucifixion, the Christ Candle is removed. All is darkness. All is in shadow.

But sitting where I was on Good Friday I could see the candle's flame still burning. Elizabeth removed the Christ Candle and placed it in the chancel kitchen, hidden from view. But from my vantage point here behind the pulpit, I could see the Christ light still shining, filling the kitchen with its warm glow. In the darkness there shone the light of Christ...and I thought "That is true."

On social media, in the days before Good Friday, a discussion among UC ministers began about whether its better on Good Friday to extinguish the Christ candle or to let it shine even after the story of the Crucifixion has been read. There are theological issues at stake, about the nature of God, the life of the trinity. It seems that some prefer the symbolism of darkness. Others want to be clear that the light of Christ always shines. Both practices are just fine. In darkness and in light we are not alone.

Light is a primal thing. It affects our mood. It makes the birds return – they migrate north as the days lengthen. It makes the earth break forth with life, as plants need light to thrive. Growing light indicates the change of seasons; longer days bring the promise of spring. And you can see in the light. In darkness things can hide, lurk, and move unseen. In the light things become visible. So writes Paul: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light “

So we are called to be light. To live in the light. To be the light of a new day. To be people who spread light and that which light suggests– love, hope, life, renewal, warmth ... We are to be light, to live in the light. To let Christ shine on us, in us. We are to be light to the world.

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So what about darkness? It has its place too. Babies grow in the darkness of the womb. Seeds break forth in the darkness of the earth before they begin their journey to the light. Darkness can provide a place of retreat; stepping out of light can be a good thing to do.

Jesus shines on us. Jesus is the light of the world. We are to be light. But the darkness can be a place of holy encounter. In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor lists all the many good things that happen in the dark in Scripture:

- Abraham is led out into the dark night so that he can see the stars and hear God’s promise, that he will have as many descendants as stars in the sky.
- Jacob wrestles with an angel in the darkness of the wilderness, and has a vision of a ladder that climbs to God.
- Jacobs’s son Joseph dreams such dreams at night that he catches a pharaoh’s attention.
- The exodus from Egypt happens at night; God parts the Red Sea at night; manna falls from the sky in the wilderness at night.

...and that is just the beginning of Scripture’s story.

In the Christian tradition there are those who remind us that God is often cloaked in darkness, the Holiness of God is clouded in a deep dark mystery. *“This darkness and cloud is always between you and God no matter what you do”* writes the anonymous fourteenth-century author of the spiritual classic: *The Cloud of Unknowing*,:” *it [darkness] prevents you from seeing God with the light of your understanding ...So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can for if you are to experience God all, it must be in this cloud and in this darkness.”*

A thousand years earlier, a Cappadocian monk named Gregory of Nyssa looked at the story of Moses meeting God on Mt Sinai, to receive Israel’s covenant with God, and concluded that *“Moses’ vision began with light...Afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the dark-ness.”* When Moses encounters God in Exodus, he meets God in darkness - the Hebrew word for this particular and holy darkness is *araphel*; in this sacred gloom there is a deep and holy encounter.

So, Gregory wrote, those of us who wish to draw near to God should not be surprised when our vision goes cloudy, *“for this is a sign that we are approaching the opaque splendor of God.”* The pinnacle of the spiritual journey toward God, Gregory says, exists in complete and dazzling darkness.

A few years ago, the journals of Mother Theresa were published and they revealed that this saintly woman lived for years in a spiritual darkness. She found God in the poor, encountered Jesus in the sick and homeless, but in prayer she found only darkness, an impenetrable cloud that hid God away. She found this darkness to be very difficult. Reading her memoirs, people were shocked to think that such a saint encountered an impenetrable darkness in prayer. But those who are familiar with some of the mystical and historical traditions of our faith were not surprised by this revelation. Like many people who live close to God, Mother Theresa found herself in what Gregory of Nyssa calls “ a dazzling darkness – the opaque splendor of God” , what a 14th C mystic called the “Cloud of Unknowing...”

Light. Light is good. After a hard winter, it’s so good to have longer days, more light, a hint that winter is waning. And we are called to live in the light. To bask in the light of Christ. To be light to the world around us.

On this volunteer Sunday we can think of how many people here are sharing Christ’s light in what they do in the church and beyond. We can think of people who have shown us the light of God’s love and peace, shared the Christ light with us.

And sometimes some people are thought of as belonging in the darkness, of being far from the light. And we can think of how Jesus brought the prostitute, caught in adultery, into the center of things. We can think of how Philip brought an African, a eunuch, an outsider, who was seen as unclean, into the community of God in baptism. In light and dark there is God.

And when we encounter darkness? The darkness of the senseless deaths in Toronto this week? The darkness of struggle or loss or... when there is darkness we may not be far from God. There is blessing in darkness too, and many who have journeyed deep into God’s presence, find that in the darkness God is there, deeply present.

The writer of the Gospel of John writes that a *light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome the light*. And even in the deepest darkness God is there.

Amen