

Luminescence- Welcoming Light, Honoring Darkness

Beacon UU Congregation

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In the Western Abrahamic religious traditions, God is seen as a source of light, banishing darkness, and bringing hope. Yahweh impressively “let there be light,” Jesus is famously “the way, truth and light,” and Allah is characterized as the “Universal Light.”

Darkness is seen as an enemy, associated with evil, with the shadow. It wasn’t always that way – some of the earliest human religions were earth based and celebrated darkness. Or, at minimum, honored it as a source of deep wisdom and discovery. Eastern religions lift up the spiritual benefits of darkness, too, reminding us that it can point us to our most authentic feelings and to our deepest desires. Buddha himself exhorted us to “be lights unto our ourselves.”

Learning to sit in the darkness takes courage and faith. Whether we are brokenhearted, ill, alone, depressed, or fearful, darkness asks us to pause and listen to what our still small voice may be trying to tell us. We aren’t meant to stay in the dark forever, but long enough to experience what may be uncomfortably real before emerging back out into the light.

In the story Pia shared earlier, The People Who Loved the Light, a tale with Pagan origins, the world became too bright, and the relentless sunshine exhausted them. They yearned for the nourishing darkness, offering rest. When their world was brought into balance, they exhaled and slept gratefully.

This may be an old-timey fable, but it is relevant for us, here today, modern folk in this mountain town. Flagstaff is a near perfect metaphor for welcoming light and honoring darkness. One of the things I like to share about Flagstaff is that the sun shines just about every day. It’s nice, isn’t it? And then, there is the distinction of being a dark sky city, a place that celebrates and protects a night sky, punctuated with clearly visible constellations. This is a rarity now in most of our populated areas – something to cherish and preserve.

In her poem, “The Dark Sky Society,” Helen Oswald speaks to us Flagstaffers, writing:

Less light is what they wanted
Less light and a chance to look up
To see tonight’s old stars shining
And dying. Dark skies and fewer
Street lamps leaking Lucozade
Into a space once reserved

For heaven where they might glimpse
Venus opening her door a crack,
Or, leaning out an upstairs window,
Overhear God making plans in verse,
Honoring the moon in half rhyme.
They understood that the heart
Needs a dark place to thump undetected,
To go underground like a badger, burrowing
Its own blind streets, to back out unseen
Into field where the beet sweetens.

I wouldn't say less light is what we generally want, except in the case of dark sky principles. There are all kinds of "light pollution" beyond streetlamps. For example, the incessant, fluorescent glare of social media and the shadowless lives others display on Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok. Was Thanksgiving truly just perfect, nameless friend? I know you and I know you have an addicted son and your husband is chronically ill. I know money is running short. Why do we need to run so fast and hard from the shadows of real life?

The balance of welcoming light and honoring darkness is especially tricky this time of year. Advent is about waiting for that bright star above the manger, after all. Nictitating hope. For us personally, the holidays may bring joyful reunions, or they may bring up painful truths or memories. All that *Musak* and shiny tinsel can be hard to take if you are not feeling ho-ho-ho merry. For some, it will be another Blue Christmas. It's okay to rest in the nourishing dark. And it is a hallmark of beloved community to reach out to light another's path.

My colleague, the Rev. Kristen Harper, who is one of our BIPOC ministers, reminds us that the societal realities of prejudice, especially racism, spur us to consider how we've intentionally or not, demonized blackness (or darkness).

The Rev. Harper is the author of the Skinner House book, [The Darkness Divine](#). She writes: "To begin the dismantling of our racist language, we first need a new theology of darkness—a new way to relate to the darkness, blackness, and brownness that surrounds us, and to the people whose skin is often reflected in our disempowering language. As a student of religion and race for many decades, I have been concerned about the consistent equating of darkness and blackness with negative qualities such as sin and despair. Our connection to the divine is a deeply personal, driving force. Continuing to associate black and dark with "evil" or "the absence of God" has only contributed to fear, dehumanization, and violence toward Black and brown people. A new relationship with blackness and darkness should include lifting up the creation possible within the dark and its empowering and nurturing qualities."

In one of his sermons, my colleague, the Rev. Joe Cleveland, centers the renowned African American author, James Baldwin, who wrote that “One discovers the light in darkness, that is what darkness is for.” Baldwin believes that, “a human being can only be saved by another human being.” Perhaps this is one thing the darkness teaches us. Baldwin tells us that, “It is necessary, while in darkness, to know that there is a light somewhere, to know that in oneself, waiting to be found, there is a light.” And that sounds comforting and reassuring. But then his next sentence is: “What the light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith.”

Light doesn’t just make you feel good, according to Baldwin. You can’t live without it but light the way Baldwin describes it is more about awareness of how we are dependent on one another to survive. It seems to be about a clearer or more heightened awareness of threats to our interwoven, interdependent selves and communities, threats like COVID and racism, gun violence, war, wealth inequality. We light candles of hope in the darkness, sometimes against the darkness, perhaps not often enough to honor the darkness.

In his reflection entitled, “With or Without Candlelight,” John Marsh suggests that “If you are going to meditate by candlelight, do not hurry to light the candle. Otherwise, you will lose the contours of the room. If you walk the by flashlight, the sounds of animals will frighten you. Shut off the beam and you will travel the night forest as one who belongs. Let us praise things dark and beautiful.”

May you know a rich, dazzling darkness that is for you a source of insight and dreams, comfort and rest, inspiration, and renewal. May you have faith in the light that is always there within you, waiting to be found.

The word Luminescence is defined as a spontaneous emission of light. We can be luminescent. We can light up the world when we shine together. Blessed are we who bear the light in unbearable times. Who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow and grief.

May you have faith that you can bear that light. And may you have faith that you can rest, now and then, in the nourishing dark.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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The Darkness Divine

By Kristen L. Harper

God resides in depths of darkness
as in the light of sunbeams.

The moon shines brighter surrounded by night
and life is secure in the black waters of the womb.

As the night sky littered with stars demonstrates
again and again,

there is beauty in darkness and beauty in light—
one no more brilliant than the other,
one no more necessary than the other,
one always complementing the other.

Without the heated darkness of the Universe,
splitting neutrons, electrons, and protons from atoms,
life and light would never be.

The task for us today
is to recognize God in both—

To see the divine in the rich brown earth,
the textured black walnut,
as well as the white snow and the pale pink jellyfish.

To see the sacred in the panther and the swan.

To embrace the dignity of the Black Madonna,
as it is embodied in the Virgin Mary.

The task for us today
is to look into the multifaceted colors of the onyx
and see the miraculous spectrum of color
produced in the prism of a diamond.

