**Light and Darkness**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC – Epiphany – Jan. 5, 2020**

*Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-5, John 1:1-5*

These past twelve days of Christmas, we have celebrated the light. In the deepest darkness of our northern wintertime, we have lit more and more candles to symbolize the coming of the One who is called the Light of the World. And today we come to Epiphany, that day of revelations and realizations, of beholding the glory of God, as the Three Wise Ones did so long ago.

We often associate Epiphany and epiphanies with light – we speak of the Light of the World and of a new day dawning, as in the Gospel of John and the book of Isaiah. We speak of wisdom and knowledge as “enlightenment” and symbolize groundbreaking ideas with a lightbulb being illuminated above a thinker’s head – that proverbial “aha” moment. This mirrors the direction of our natural world in this season, as our northern hemisphere begins to turn again toward the sun and our days begin to lengthen ever so slightly. Many of our readings today speak of light in this way. But recently I’ve read several reminders not to limit God to light alone, and to be aware of how we use the language of light and darkness in our worship.

Pastor Anne Dunlap recently wrote about how “we are taught to fear darkness, to avoid darkness at all costs. Darkness is something to be endured, overcome. Darkness is evil, scary, bad, sinful.” This shows up in the popular imagination as the Star Wars stories speak of “the dark side of the Force” and the Harry Potter series has a “Dark Lord” as its villain. And when the news is particularly grim, we worry about “[t]hese ‘dark’ times we live in.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This kind of symbolism of light = good and holy and darkness = bad and sinful has functioned in devastating ways in Christian history, as it has been “mapped” onto people groups and human skin tones in racist ways, fueling the sins of colonialism, and white supremacy and racial genocide. Rev. Dunlap reminds us that this kind of thinking is not actually true to the biblical text. “Notice,” she says, the Gospel of “John does not say that light *vanquishes* darkness. Rather, light and darkness are brought into balance. One does not overcome the other.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This, again resonates with the cycles of our natural world, which in fact could not function without both light and darkness. Barbara Brown Taylor writes about darkness as absolutely necessary for new life, whether that is the darkness of a woman’s “dusky womb” where a baby grows, or the darkness under the earth, where seeds take root and sprout.[[3]](#footnote-3) As much as we associate light with God’s glory, the Bible also speaks of God as present in darkness. In Exodus, God is present as a pillar of fire by night when the Israelites are wandering in the desert, and in Exodus 20, it even speaks of Moses approaching “the thick darkness where God was" on Mount Sinai (20:21). Psalm 139 is another example of God as the God of both darkness and light, as it affirms, “even the darkness is not dark to you [O God]; / the night is as bright as the day, / for darkness is as light to you” (Ps. 139:12).

So what can we do to right this imbalance? A first step is to examine the language we use in worship and prayer for “our embedded biases” toward metaphors of light. Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler highlights a seldom-sung hymn in our blue Hymnals called, “Joyful is the Dark.” The lyrics, written by Brian Wren, describe “darkness roaring in thunderclouds, revealing divine depths, shrouding a majestic divinity.”[[4]](#footnote-4) They also speak of God as present in the beauty of darkness at creation: “silken sheen of midnight, plumage black and bright, swooping with the beauty of a raven.”[[5]](#footnote-5) If we hold these images of the beauty and holiness of darkness alongside our more familiar images of light, we will begin to get a much fuller picture of our God, in whom light and darkness hold together. And to see this, we need to look no further than our own Christmas Eve candlelight service here at Nutana. At the end, as we sang “Silent Night” and each person held a flame in the darkened sanctuary, there was such beauty. And the thing is, it would not have been nearly as beautiful with all the lights on! The candlelight is beautiful precisely because of the darkness that embraces and enfolds it.[[6]](#footnote-6) And God is found in both. AMEN [invite communion servers forward]

1. See Rev. Anne Dunlap, “The Pastoral is Political: Embracing the Darkness,” <https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/12/23/the-pastoral-is-political-embracing-the-darkness/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Redeeming Darkness,” in *Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-11/redeeming-darkness> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Melissa Florer-Bixler, *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brian Wren, verse 2 of “Joyful is the Dark,” in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, # 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anne Dunlap mentions something similar in “Embracing the Darkness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)