

The rhetoric of darkness

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My mother died on the winter solstice shortly after her 50th birthday. So I have spent a lot of time thinking about darkness and the return of the light.

As I read Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, I wondered if I had fallen prey to the dualistic paradigm she finds so troubling: darkness, bad and God-less; light, good and God-filled. I don't think so, but talking about darkness and light is tricky, in part because it can be so *powerful*.

I applaud Taylor's effort to remind us that

even when you cannot see where you are going and no one answers when you call ... there is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down.

Yet even here, in speaking as she does about unexpected "treasures of darkness," we must proceed with caution. One of the things that is rhetorically powerful (and dangerous) about the metaphor of darkness is that it can signal any manner of unpleasantness or evils, from spiritual confusion to violent sexual abuse.

This week's passage from Isaiah 45 talks about darkness and light in sociopolitical terms, referring to the well-being of societies, not just individuals. Is there a general state of well-being in the community, or is there suffering? The prophet points to God's hand at work in guiding an emperor who creates broad-ranging "woe and weal." That is difficult theology for a contemporary preacher.

Then, in the Gospel reading, Jesus' voice jumps into the conversation by raising a different question about emperors: What belongs to them? What belongs to God?

Taylor refers frequently to a sort of personal darkness and loss that has more to do with John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul" than with social suffering. In reflecting on Jesus' unexpected answer to the pharisees, however, Rowan Williams's words in *A Ray of Darkness* seem to bring the two together:

The dark night is God's attack on religion. If you genuinely desire union with the unspeakable love of God, then you must be prepared to have your "religious" world shattered. If you think devotional practices, theological insights, even charitable actions give you some sort of a purchase on God, you are still playing games. On the other hand . . . if you can accept that God is more than an idea that keeps your religion or philosophy or politics tidy -- then you may find a way back to religion, philosophy, or politics, to an engagement with them that is more creative because you are more aware of the oddity, the uncontrollable quality of the truth at the heart of all things.

Can we preachers and teachers bring these ideas together as well?