

Redeeming darkness

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As I write this, the end of daylight saving time is right around the corner. A week from now the sun will come up at 7 a.m. and set before 6 p.m., so that the day is more dark than light. Darkness is complete where I live, way out in the country at the end of a dirt road. When city people come to visit, they get jumpy after dark. Christian people do too, leading me to wonder where we got the idea that darkness exists chiefly to be vanquished.

Biblically speaking, darkness is the pits. In the first testament, light stands for life and darkness for death. Sheol is dark as hell. When God is angry with people, they are plunged into darkness. Locusts darken the land. People grope in the dark without light, for the day of the Lord is darkness and not light.

In the second testament, light stands for knowledge and darkness for ignorance. When the true light comes into the world, the world does not know him. He has come so that everyone who believes in him should not remain in the darkness, but they love darkness more than light. On the day he dies, darkness descends on the land from noon until three. First John sums it up: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

Or, in the vernacular of the Chattahoochee Baptist Church sign near my house, "If you cut God's light off, you'll be sitting in the dark with the devil."

This strikes me as a problematic teaching on the verge of Advent, the church season of deepening darkness, when Christians are asked to remember that we measure time differently from the dominant culture in which we live. We begin our year when the days are getting darker, not lighter. We count sunset as the beginning of a new day. However things appear to our naked eyes, we trust that the seeds of light are planted in darkness, where they sprout and grow we know not how. This darkness is necessary to new life, even when it is uncomfortable and goes on too long.

Ask any expectant mother if she wants her baby to come early and she will say no, she does not. As badly as her back hurts, as long as it has been since she has seen her toes, she is willing to wait because the baby is not ready yet. The eyelashes are ready, but not the fingernails. The kidneys are ready, but not the lungs. Those wing-shaped sacks are still preparing to make the leap from fluid to air. There is still more time to do in the dusky womb, where the baby is growing like a seed in the dark.

The child's parents may never be ready, especially if this is their first. They want this; they are terrified of this. They planned for this; they cannot imagine how this happened. Meanwhile, they have a few baby-less weeks to go, which they can put to good use. They can make sure the nursery is ready. They can learn to sing some lullabies. They can think about what it means to bring a human being into the world, and what it will take to raise this child up into his or her full humanity. All they cannot do is hold a baby in the light, because the baby is still in the dark.

The church waits like this during Advent—mulishly refusing to sing the songs pouring from loudspeakers at every shopping mall, stubbornly counting the days, puritanically declining to open any presents—because the baby is not ready yet, which means that we are not ready either. We have some time in the dark left to go.

There is one word for darkness in the Bible that stands out from the rest. It shows up in the book of Exodus, at the foot of Mount Sinai, right after God has delivered Torah to the people: "Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (20:21).

This is *araphel*, my concordance says, the thick darkness that indicates God's presence as surely as the brightness of God's glory—something God later clarifies through the prophet Isaiah, in case anyone missed it earlier. "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things" (Isa. 45:6-7).

Here is a helpful reminder to all who fear the dark. Darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God. The long nights of Advent and the early mornings of Easter both point us toward the God for whom darkness and light are alike. Both are fertile seasons for those who walk by faith and not by sight.

Even in the dark, the seed sprouts and grows—we know not how—while God goes on giving birth to the truly human in Christ and in us.