

No darkness at all? (1 John 1:1-2:2)

On navigating light/dark language for worship

by [Steve Thorngate](#)

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“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.”

A few years ago I did a project that involved editing and writing liturgical texts for the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany cycle. I quickly realized that I needed to think hard about the issue of light/dark imagery.

I know people who think our worship should avoid such language altogether because it can be and has been used to bolster White supremacy. I know others who think we should use it freely because it's biblical. Neither approach seems adequate to me.

Yes, the light/dark binary pervades scripture. This week's reading from 1 John is a classic example but far from the only one. Of course, the Bible says lots of things, and not all of them find their way into our liturgies (or even our lectionaries).

Christian views of scripture vary, but I have yet to visit a church that gives every jot and tittle equal weight. So the fact that this language is in the Bible hardly seems like the last word on its suitability for worship. Some biblical language is hurtful to some of us, and we have to take that seriously.

But I'm just as uncomfortable jettisoning the language of light and darkness entirely. After all, it's not just biblical—it's elemental. The days and seasons are defined by Earth's relationship with the sun. Humans since the beginning of time have been shaped by these cycles of light and darkness—and the depth of this shared reality makes it a rich source for liturgical language.

The church year, after all, is not organized first and foremost around the life of Jesus—that comes second. The church year is fundamentally a calendar, a way of marking time, and as such it is deeply invested in days and seasons. It is deeply invested in darkness and light as natural phenomena.

So how can those of us who work with liturgical language use these words and ideas well? How can we embrace their richness while also taking care to minimize their harm?

I'm convinced it's important to find ways to thread this needle. I'm not at all convinced that the particular guidelines I came up with, as I worked on my project, are the best available. But here are the ones I tried to follow:

1) Consider the different senses in which positive language about light is used. Light can mean illumination, sight, transparency, openness, the revealing of secrets. It can also connote color, complexion, and even cleanness. Use the first sense of "light" with care. Avoid the second.

2) Be very cautious about using negative language about darkness. Yes, it's logically implicit in positive language about light. But it also matters what we make *explicit*, what we say out loud and emphasize and repeat. So it is possible to use (some) positive light language while also taking care not to actively disparage darkness.

3) Ask yourself, in a given situation, if you need to use light/dark language at all. Is there another good way to say this? Is it important enough to prioritize saying it at all?

4) Don't use black/white language to mean bad/good. Just don't. The racist interpretation is too immediate, too hard to avoid. Find another way.

5) Perhaps most importantly: Say positive things about darkness. Fertile soil is dark. Secrets and mysteries aren't always bad things; their illumination isn't always good. Exodus 20 (contra 1 John 1) suggests that God dwells in darkness, while the psalmist praises the protection provided by God's shadow. These are rich areas for liturgical language.

6) It's OK if your liturgical images exist in tension. The goal is not a tidy, closed system of what light/dark language or anything else can mean. Our metaphors proliferate, overlap, and sometimes even conflict. This is fine. As with expansive

language efforts around God and gender, Christian light/dark language might benefit from a longer list of available options rather than a shorter one.

I've found these guidelines useful, but they remain a work in progress. It's a difficult challenge. Can we eschew liturgical language that promotes racism while continuing to explore language to praise the God who makes sun and Earth and moon, days and seasons and years? I don't know, but I want to try.