



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, YEAR B, JANUARY 11, 2021  
GENESIS 1:1-5; PSALM 29; ACTS 19:1-7; MARK 1:4-11

## LIGHT AND DARKNESS

**Genesis 1:1-5** *[In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.]*

**Mark 1:4-11** *[John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”]*

*Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness...*

It is not coincidence, I think, that we hear these first words this morning, on the cusp of what surely we can agree has been a difficult week. Many have labeled it “a dark week.”

In the beginning...the first day of creation...these first five verses of scripture invite us back to our grounding in a God who created for good...who created us “good.” More than 30,000 scripture verses follow these first five, including those that tell the bedrock story of baptism we hear once more this morning, but taken as a whole, our scriptures tell the story time and again of light

and darkness intermingled in the lives of our forebears. Time and again we hear the invitation to go deeper into the darkness, the place of unknowing, scary as it may be, because there we will find the God who is actively creating even still, and longing for the goodness that dwells in us to infuse the story in fresh, creative ways.

A word of caution though as we consider light and darkness. We must acknowledge that the scriptures, and our modern sensibilities, too often construct an aesthetic of light and darkness as polarized opposites, which in crudest form casts light as positive and darkness as negative, or as cognates for good and evil. Light becomes theological proxy for wisdom, goodness, beauty, and truth, while darkness is demonized to represent ignorance, sin, ugliness, and all that is disreputable.<sup>i</sup>

Such an overly simplistic interpretation of light and darkness has been used in racialized ways, in the Christian tradition, and in this nation, with devastating effect. Few would argue that the insurrection that unfolded in Washington this past Wednesday has its roots in white supremacy that has, in the course of our nation's history, sought scriptural justification for violent exploitation taking the form of slavery, lynching, profiling, and much, much more.

But as we gather this morning, we must consider for ourselves how traditional Christian rhetoric aligning God with lightness, and the demonic with darkness, translates rather readily into a narrative that holds lightness as congruent with whiteness with all the blind spots that come as accoutrements to myths of power, be they religious or secular.

Words matter...we saw it again this past week when a sitting president stoked the flames of passion into a frenzied and violent insurrection with rippling effects that shook us all.

I'm just saying that our words matter, too, and we need to take great care especially when we apply sacred weight to them, and know that words used for divine attribution can never really plumb the depths of God's mysteries. As T.S. Eliot once wrote:

*Words strain,*

*Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,*

*Under the tension, slip, slide, perish...<sup>ii</sup>*

This is not to say we should abandon the metaphors of light and darkness altogether, as if we could and not render our scriptures inert.

The purpose of belaboring all this with you this morning is just the opposite—that the holy Word, and specifically the words of light and darkness, have bearing in our lives precisely because they invite us to go deeper so that we might discover God there...and *there* is very often in the darkness. The deep, dark womb of spiritual birth, where the heart races, the senses are honed, and nothing is certain because the spiritual terrain is uncharted—by us perhaps, but not by God.

To be sure, there is a rich heritage of Christian theology that plumbs these more nuanced regions of darkness—Dionysius, Bonaventure, John of the Cross and others who see light and darkness, not as opposites, but as companions in creation, and on the spiritual journey.

And modern theologians have carried the theme—Sarah Coakley uses the phrase “dazzling darkness” as the locus of divine and mystical experience.<sup>iii</sup> Black liberation theologians invite us to consider a more inclusive aesthetic in which the Black Christ can be found most readily in the midst of Black communities struggling under the weight of centuries of oppression by white supremacy. And Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, praises the darkness for its gifts of revelatory beauty and truth and goodness.<sup>iv</sup>

Our liturgical tradition holds the space for this as well. Today when we baptize Aaron and Cayla into this life in Christ, we will present them each with a candle, lit from the Paschal Candle, and speak a few words reminding them that the candle is a symbol of the light of Christ that burns brightly within them. We believe that, wholeheartedly, but taken in context with the rest of the baptismal rite, which bears witness to both light and darkness, we are all invited to the deeper dive into the waters of life that sustain us on the journey, wherever it may take us. And wherever it may take us, baptism assures us of God’s presence, and of our indissoluble bond of belovedness.

Even at Jesus’ baptism, the word used to describe the sky overhead suggests a low bank of dark storm clouds which part upon command—literally, the Greek word *schizo*—clouds were ripped open for the voice of God to speak those words of blessed assurance. Words matter.

Yesterday, Presiding Bishop Curry offered the Church a reflection in the wake of a dark week when storm clouds brewed over this nation in sobering ways. He reminded us of our belovedness once more, and called us once more to the way of love. It is the way forward for us, and for our nation. He cited Archbishop Tutu who testified that our work

is not about turning a blind eye to the wrong. There must be an honest confrontation with reality. Only that can bring forth real healing.<sup>v</sup>

Real healing is deep healing, the sort that plumbs the dark depths within and calls on the full body to focus its energy and attention to that healing. It will not happen if we skim along the surface. It will not happen if we focus all our energy on those people. Yes, there must be an honest confrontation with reality. But let us avoid the impulse to use words as weapons upon one another. As Bishop Curry said, our words must be shared as blessings, drawing on the goodness which God forged into you, in the beginning. Be an agent of God's creative love.

My friends, it has been a difficult week, a dark week, yes, and questions linger, for our democracy and for us as people of faith.:

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<sup>i</sup> Boston College professor of theology Andrew Prevot has written a good deal about this, and much of the thematic content here is drawn from an article he published on the topic, [Project MUSE - Divine Opacity: Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics \(jhu.edu\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> As cited, [The dazzling darkness – joshuamcnall.com](#)

Are we willing to stand in the darkness of this moment, not just as a contemptible act by others, but also as an opportunity to plot a new course as a nation? That is a much more difficult task, to be sure.

Can we with courage step into the work of deep healing this nation desperately needs...that we each need?

Can we trust that God is in the midst of it all, creating for good, even when we cannot yet see it?

And are you willing to be an agent of God's creative love here and now?

Because God created you for good, and the light of Christ burns brightly within you precisely for a time such as this.

<sup>iii</sup> [The dazzling darkness – joshuamcnall.com](#)

<sup>iv</sup> An essay capturing a good thematic summary of her book was published in Time, [Barbara Brown Taylor: In Praise of Darkness | Time](#)

<sup>v</sup> I commend the full homiletical exhortation by Bishop Curry. [Presiding Bishop Curry's Word to the Church: Who shall we be? – Episcopal News Service](#)