



LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

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Genesis 15:1-18; Luke 13:31-35

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The fact that God, or one of God's messengers, has to begin so many sentences in the Bible with the words: "Do not be afraid..." should tell us something. It tells us something about God, yes, but it also tells us something about ourselves. What it tells us about God is that there are times when God arrives with very important and weighty matters; with news that can seem overwhelming, involving responsibilities that have implications that are alarming or impossible or dangerous, or all of the above. What it tells us about ourselves is that when it comes to the weighty matters of God, we are often, okay always, unprepared or uncertain or scared to death, and probably all of the above.

Genesis 12 opens with Abram at 75 and Sarai not much younger, settled down on the family farm in Haran, enjoying retirement and routines. Suddenly God calls, really commands them to leave their ancestral lands, and strike out for a new home God promises to show them, but does not provide the forwarding address. God also mentions that their little nuclear family, which consisted of the two of them and their nephew, Lot, will become a great nation and a blessing to many.

With nothing more to go on than that, remarkably they set out on this wild promise and skimpy plan. Over the next few chapters, they run into several dilemmas and hardships. So that by Genesis 15, when God speaks again to Abram about that promise of a great reward, this time Abram talks back. Pushes back, really.

Doug and I spoke in an adult education class a couple of weeks ago about our own prayer lives. I talked about how our public prayers always begin with adoration and thanksgiving to God. I spoke of prayer as poetry and handed out some of my



favorite prayers with language beautiful and tender and grand. Doug, who dances as he speaks, was a bit more down to earth than I—even bending on one knee to show how, in our prayers, we may plead with God. But neither of us comes close to Abram’s prayer life as demonstrated here.

God uses the lofty language we expect of God: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great.” It is Abram’s response that is shocking! “O good Lord, really? What have you done for me lately? I’m older than I was when you first showed up, my nephew moved to a different town, so unless you choose some random guy named Eliezer to be my heir, that great nation bit is looking more like a dead end cul-de-sac.” Abram seems less afraid than put out. God responds, with a voice calm and expansive as ever: Eliezer will not be your heir. No one but your very own son shall be your heir.” And then God invites Abram to come outside of his little tent, that small ark of safety in the desert. To step out into the open air of the night. Then, with a sweep of the divine arm that stretches from the east to the west, God continues to speak the confident word of promise: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them, Abram. So shall your descendants be.”

This is the first occasion the passage tells us what time it is when all of this takes place. And if it were only once, we might just assume that the stars are a simple and convenient metaphor...for the descendants that will come; though they are no more than a twinkle in the old man’s eye right now. But twice more this passage notes that all of this happened at night. Verse 12 is next: “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram (the same sleep, by the way, that fell upon Adam in the Garden when God did a little rib surgery creating Eve), and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.” And then again at verse 17: “When the sun had gone down and it was dark...” So, three times, underlined: The confident promise of God, in whom the night is as bright as the day, is spoken to the doubtful Abram, who, yes, can see the stars, but only because everything else around him is dark. And it is a terrifying darkness, Genesis notes.



The exquisite writer and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, wrote a book a few years ago whose title is the title of today's sermon: *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. She notes that we are taught to come inside when it gets dark, to be afraid of the darkness because often 'darkness' is equated with negative things. Christianity, she writes, "has never had anything nice to say about darkness. . . . From earliest times, Christians have used 'darkness' as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death."ⁱ Taylor lives on a farm in a rural area of north Georgia, so she experiences more darkness than she did when she lived in Atlanta or than we do in Manhattan, and she has come to appreciate and to pay closer attention to the darkness in her changed environment. She reflects theologically on the problems our language about darkness can cause. She writes:

"It divides every day in two, pitting the light against the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own time. It implies things about dark-skinned people and sight-impaired people that are not true. Worst of all," she continues, "it offers people of faith a giant closet where they can store everything that threatens or frightens them without thinking too much about those things...leaving us with a spirituality that deals with darkness by denying its existence or at least depriving it of any meaningful attention...leaving us with "the sunny side of faith" dwelling in the light of God 24/7."ⁱⁱ

Taylor decided to explore darkness as a natural part of the rhythm God has established in creation, to seek its gifts and what it might teach her about faith. She acknowledges, of course, there are darknesses that are debilitating and must be endured and where possible changed—a chronic illness, grinding poverty, depression. But in this book, she is thinking more about the spiritual darkness we encounter: fear of the unknown, familiarity with divine absence, mistrust of conventional wisdom, keen awareness of the limits of language about God, the shame of our own inability to speak of God without qualifiers, and doubt we have about the health of our own soul. Her book, then, is an invitation to explore learning to "walk in the dark." She wrote it for a wide audience—for a young person in deep need of faith, but not the kind you inherited from your parents. For



those in the middle of life whose dreams have died under the weight of our expectations, who have knocked on doors that did not open, or for whom a job or a relationship that once gave you meaning has come to an end and so it is time to reinvent everything from your work life to your love life to your relationship with God. And it is a book, too, for people who, like Taylor, are growing older and losing more things than you once did...who wonder about how to get ready for where all of this is heading, and discover the work you have left to do.ⁱⁱⁱ

She tells a couple of stories, then. One about a child she has known since the girl was born. She came to visit for a day or two on the farm, but who was so terrified of the dark she would not follow Taylor into the henhouse to get eggs at night. She tells of a man who lived in a small, safe Scottish village. How he had learned as a boy to manage his fear and carry the milk jars down to the bottom of his driveway in utter darkness. Taylor wonders: How do we develop the courage to walk in the dark if we are never asked to practice?^{iv} Her book invites us to do just that.

As Helen told us as she introduced the Scripture reading, Genesis 15 is the pivotal chapter in the whole Abrahamic tradition. For it is here that God and Abram face each other at a critical moment. What do we do when the promises of God are delayed to the point of doubt? How do we dare to trust when the evidence against the promise is stronger than the evidence for it? This is the “scandal,” as Walter Brueggemann puts it, that is faced here.

And everything rides on the outcome of the first 6 verses. God repeats the promise made. Abram protests, resists, and doubts it. God repeats the promise again. After all, God can see farther than Abram can see. It is no accident that it is dark at this pivotal moment. Abram stands in a deep and terrifying darkness with nothing more than the promise of God. Will he still doubt? Genesis 15:6 then says: “And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Genesis 15:6 goes on to become a key biblical text for people from the Apostle Paul to Martin Luther. It is the text that models what faith is and how it comes. Faith does not come through persuasion; there is nothing persuasive, no proof offered, in verses 1-5. There is no new ‘data’ that comes to light. Abram is still old



and so is Sarai and they still have no child and no land of their own. Standing there in the dark at that moment of the ‘scandal of faith,’ Abram, believes. Decides that he will learn to walk in the dark because he is willing to rely on God alone, the Speaker of the promise. His life, the future...all of it are in God’s hands.

Brueggemann describes what happens to Abram’s faith this way: “God is not a hypothesis about the future, but the Voice around which Abram’s life is organized.”^v Organizing his life around the Voice of God, Abram abandons a reading of reality that can be measured by what he can see, touch, and manage. He does not have some generalized reassurance that ‘everything will turn out all right.’ No, Abram responds specifically to God’s concrete promise. He believes that God can, God will do what God promises to do. So, it is Genesis 15:6, that turns Abraham into a model of faith for the world’s three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham is lifted up three times in the letters of the New Testament, Romans 4, Galatians 3, and Hebrews 11, because of this singular moment, when Abram believed and decided he would learn to walk in the dark.

We heard today in the Gospel of Luke Jesus cry out his lament over Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets. He describes himself as a mother hen that longs to gather her chicks under her protective wings, even as he knows we choose violence instead. The terrible attacks on worshippers in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand are the latest and bloodiest reminders of our need for the mothering hen God to come to our aid. It seems to have been in the daytime when Jesus cried out over Jerusalem; he could see it all so plainly in the light of day.

But some chapters later, when Passover has begun and darkness settles, Jesus will go out to the Mount of Olives where Jerusalem waits in the growing darkness. There is no mention of stars. In the darkness Jesus will pray, asking God to remove the cup from him. An angel comes, we are told, to give him strength. And after the angel an army comes to arrest him. And so it is even for Jesus that in the darkness he must decide whether he will continue to believe. Trusting the promise of God though all the evidence is against it. Giving his faith, and indeed his life, to the



Speaker of the promise. Having organized his whole life around that Voice, Jesus now trusts God with his death, too.

We don't know how the angel strengthened him. Luke does not tell us. But because it is one of Luke's favorite sentences for angels elsewhere, maybe the angel said, "Do not be afraid" and for a moment it felt like the brush of a hen's feathers against his face.

Faith in the daytime is a blessed and good thing. But because of the rhythms God has put into the design of creation, we will also need to learn to walk in the dark; when all is not clear, when in fact the evidence against the promises of God seems stronger than the evidence in favor. Standing in that place under the distant stars we can feel unprepared, uncertain, even scared to death. All we have to go on is a promise. And Voice that keeps saying, "Do not be afraid. Follow me. I am with you always." If we believe and organize our lives around that Voice, then even the darkness can bring a blessing of its own.

Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, **Learning to Walk in the Dark** (HarperOne, 2014), 6.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, 7-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor, 14.

^{iv} Taylor, 37.

^v Walter Brueggemann, **Interpretation Commentary: Genesis** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 144.