

Steve Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Exodus 20: 18-21; John 1: 1-9
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The Thick Darkness... Where God Was

A very strange thing happens in the transition between the Old Testament and the New. We just witnessed it in our two Scripture readings. The climax of the Exodus story is not, as we often imagine, the freeing of the Hebrew slaves, and it is not the crossing of the Red Sea, where Pharaoh's army is drowned. The climax of the story comes several chapters later, on Sinai, when the law is given to Moses. Law, like language, like fire, is one of great developments of the human species, and the Hebrew Bible rightly celebrates it as a gift from God. But here's the most curious feature of the story: after delivering the ten commandments to Moses, the text tells us that Moses drew near to the thick darkness, where God was. You might have thought that it was a moment of clarity, a moment of revelation, so that God would have been enveloped in light. But that's not how it is in the Hebrew tradition. At the moment of greatest revelation, at the very apex of the Hebrew story, when the law is given, God is said to dwell in thick darkness.

Think about the dark. It is the space of unknowing. It signifies the time and space of sleep and rest. It's the domain of the unconscious, and of dreams. It's the realm of imagination, and it's also the place where eros and pleasure unfold, as in the Song of Solomon. Most important of all, the dark is the space in which the firm contours of the self are dissolved, whether in dreams, in ecstasy, or in oblivion. In the Hebrew world, then, darkness wasn't something to be shunned. It was one of the places you could go to encounter God.

Let me say parenthetically that in the Hebrew Bible, you could find God in a lot of other places too, including in the light. It's not a zero sum game. I simply wish to underscore that at the apex of revelation, God is encountered in thick darkness.

Now cut several hundred years later, to the opening of John's Gospel. The difference is curious. In the space of a single page we're in a different language - Greek, not Hebrew. But we're also in a different system of thought. You can see it in the very first lines of John, words that I read from this pulpit every Christmas Eve before we light up the Meetinghouse with candlelight. "A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it," John says. That statement is completely at odds with the Book of Exodus. And it is completely at odds with the peak experience of the Jewish people, the giving of the law by God, which happens, again, in darkness. But here, according to John, the darkness is precisely where God is not. Instead, God, now identified with Jesus, is conceived as light, coming to push back and to repel the darkness. What's going on here? And why does it matter?

Let's start with what's going on. I'll come to why it matters in just a bit. In the time between the Testaments, a sea change took place in the Mediterranean world. In 334 B.C.E., Alexander the Great launched an invasion from Macedonia, in Greece, that in a few short years would encompass Northern Africa, ancient Israel, Persia, and then extending all the way to the banks of the Ganges River in what is now India. At a young age, Alexander's father had hired no less than Aristotle to be Alexander's tutor. Aristotle, of course, had been a pupil of Plato, who had been a student of Socrates. And so with Alexander and his armies, there comes an enormous wave of Greek culture and thought, which remained in the lands that Alexander

conquered long after his armies had departed. That's why when you turn the page from the first biblical testament to the second, you're in an altered world.

But it's also part of the reason why light comes to be associated with the good, and darkness with the bad. That was a Greek conception that, I think, would have been alien to the writers of Exodus. Think of Plato's cave, in Book 7 of *The Republic*. There, humans are depicted as chained beneath the earth, gazing at shadows - illusions - cast upon the wall of the cave. The shadows are taken to be reality itself, while in fact, they're mere projections onto a kind of screen. The goal of human life is to free oneself from the darkness of the cave in order to ascend toward the light of day, which is depicted as the land of reason, of truth, of philosophy itself. In that famous episode, darkness is the space of deception. It is the space of ignorance. And it is the space of unreality, something that must be overcome in the process of becoming intellectually and spiritually "enlightened."

I don't know if the writer of John's Gospel had read Plato, but whoever it was had certainly digested some Greek philosophy. Throughout that Gospel, and really throughout the remainder of the Bible, light becomes associated with the good, while the dark is now associated not with revelation, but with ignorance at best, and evil at worst. Take John 3:19, for example: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Or take I John 1:5 for another example: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." Or think of Nicodemus, the Pharisee attracted to Jesus' teaching, who comes to Jesus in John 3 from out of the darkness in order to what? Be born again, this time into the light.

All that darkness and light talk was an effort to differentiate the fledgling community of early Christians from their Jewish neighbors, and from their predecessors. It's John's Gospel that is most preoccupied with that division. The prologue of John's Gospel is actually a polemic against Jewish conceptions of God. Exodus got it all wrong, John implies. God is found in the light, not in all that darkness. I'm sorry to report that it's a bit of early Christian anti-Semitism that we do well to examine critically, and to guard against.

Now, don't get me wrong. The Gospel of John is a complex document with some beautiful moments as well as some troublesome ones. I happen to love our Christmas Eve services. I've turned often to the metaphor of a light shining in the darkness in order to counter some of the more unnerving realities we've been forced to confront in our public life. And I happen to appreciate the functional qualities of light. Really, who doesn't? When I turn the car on at night, the first thing I do before driving is to turn on the lights. And when I get up early in the morning, before it is light, the first thing I do is to reach for the light switch, so that I don't stumble. At this time of year, I long for the return of light, or more light at any rate, to roll back the long nights, but also to roll back the melancholy that too often sets in during winter. It sounds trite to say it, but I love light, and I have a hunch that's true for most people.

But I've begun to wonder if all that talk of a light shining in the darkness, and the darkness not being able to overcome it, has come with a profound and terrible cost. At the most obvious level, it was used as a wedge, driven between Christian and Jewish communities, and Christian and Jewish understandings of God. That's one cost, which probably deserves its own sermon.

But there's another, related, cost to leaving those metaphors unexamined. Because somewhere along the way, those tropes of darkness and light were biologized. They were racialized, and applied to human beings. Then, they were applied to whole parts of the world. In

fact, at one point, that whole binary conception - light good/dark bad, was applied to an entire continent, “darkest Africa,” as the saying goes, in need of the “light” of civilization.

Those of us who traveled to Western Africa felt viscerally how that conception played out on the continent. We were able to visit the Cape Coast Castle on the shores of Ghana, one of the most notorious slave dungeons in the world. There, in the very architecture of the castle, we witnessed how the imagination of darkness and light found in the *Republic*, and reproduced in the Gospel of John, had gone on to shape the modern world. There at the castle, our guide led us down a steep ramp into the dungeons where thousands of captive Africans were held, for two to three months, prior to being shipped across the ocean. There were four distinct rooms, and at any given time some 250 people would be crammed into each of those sections. Narrow shafts of light came through air holes cut into the rock in several of those rooms, but it was precious little. Hanging lightbulbs gave us enough light by which to see, but at a certain point, the lights were turned off, just to give us a sense for how thick the darkness might have been. It was unnerving. In silence, we descended into the deepest part of the dungeon, and there we saw an altar, built to honor the African deities that those who once were trapped in that space might have worshiped. There in the shadows, ceremonies are now conducted to honor those who passed through that place.

But here’s where the architecture is revealing, almost as though it were a twisted and sick spatial representation of Plato’s cave, or of John’s prologue. Indeed, the entire history of colonialism was represented symbolically in the ascent we were about to make. We walked out of the dungeon, and eventually up a set of stairs. Immediately above the dungeon was a Christian chapel, with windows that opened to the light flooding in from the shore. While the Africans were suffering below, British soldiers and administrators could engage their God, revealed to them, of course, not in a scene of darkness but of light. But then right above the chapel, as if at the apex of Plato’s cave structure, sat the governor’s quarters. It had a grand front room with a bank of windows facing the Atlantic. Light poured in from the front and the sides. That was where the governor and his family were able to relax, and to entertain guests. And I want to tell you, the view was nothing short of spectacular. Had it been furnished, and shorn of its context, it could have been featured in a glossy magazine spread, the kind that most of us have been taught to think of as beautiful, as something to be desired. But there was nothing beautiful about it. All that light, all that supposed beauty, served to conceal a profound cancer of the soul and the heart, as pure an evil as anything I can imagine. By contrast, what I sensed below, in the dungeons, in addition to the horror, was a will to preserve what was best and noblest in humanity. There in the darkness of the dungeon, I had to fight back tears, but I also had to fight back the urge to kneel on the ground, upon a pathway made from dried human waste, and to kiss those stones, from sorrow, yes, but also from a sense of reverence for all the many gifts the descendents of those captives had brought to the world.

Here’s what I asked our group, and here’s what I’ll ask you. If God is - and that’s an open question when you’re confronting a place like the Cape Coast Castle - but if God is, then where was God within that architectural structure? Up on top, in the light? Well, you might be forgiven for thinking so, because most everything we’ve been taught suggests that to get to the good, to get to God, you move up, toward the light. But God was not there. Was God in the middle, in the chapel, with its well lit cross, altar, and sacred Book? Well, you could also be forgiven for thinking so, for we’ve been taught to revere the presence of such symbols. But God was not there. Or was God down below, in the darkness, where it was hard to see, hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to stay alive? Is that where God was?

If God is, if God was to be found anywhere in that place, then I believe that God was in the dungeon. I believe that God forsook the light. And I believe that God forsook those who wished to dwell in the light, or at least to dwell in that light. God did so in order to be with those who suffered in darkness below. If God is, then God can only have been there, amidst all that suffocating and starving humanity. And is that not the meaning, finally, of the cross? Is it not the promise that no matter how thick the darkness, no matter how thick the dungeon, God will be there?

But here's a further thing I believe. If God was anywhere, God was there, yes, dying with those who died, but also accompanying those who made it out, helping them to survive, and eventually, to thrive. God went with them as a new kind of light. And so I believe it was something of God that allowed them to run away when they did. And I believe it was something of God that gave them the courage to revolt when they did, like in Haiti. I believe it was something of God that helped them to sing, when they did, and to love one another, when they did. And if that's true, then it must also be true that wherever descendents of those captive peoples have thrived, in Black churches and in Gospel music, in Mosques and in Santeria shrines, in Vodou ceremonies and in juke joint roadhouses, then God must have been there too; and God must have been in the jazz, in the samba, in the cumbia, in the mambo and the rumba, in the reggae and the funk, in the hip hop and the reggaeton - God must be in it all, because if God is, then God must have been down there, in the dungeons and the darkness, not in the light. And God must also have accompanied them out of the dungeons and into a different kind of light, a darker kind of light, if such a thing exists, if such a thing makes sense.

Those were a few of my thoughts as we walked about that terrible, but also that sacred, place. But where did it leave me, I wondered, a white minister who has far more in common with those who dwelt on the second and third levels of that architecture than those who dwelt below? Where did it leave the rest of our group, at least those of us who were white? And where did it leave all the other white Europeans and North and South Americans who find their way to the Cape Coast Castle? Where does it leave a church such as ours, emerging as we do, at least in part, from some proximity to that awful Castle?

A hint of an answer came at the very end of our tour. We were invited by our guide to go out through the Door of No Return, and to imagine what it must have been like to step across that threshold 200 or 300 or 500 years ago. Once outside, we were then invited to turn around. The Door of No Return was now marked as the Door of Return, and we were invited to step across that threshold. Is this meant for those of us who are white, I wondered? Are we permitted to return? We were. Once inside, our guide directed our attention to a sign that said "Akwaaba," Welcome. It was meant especially for those whose ancestors had once crossed through the Door of No Return. But it was also meant for those of us who identify as white. It was meant for all of us.

It was meant for those of us who traveled, but I think it was also meant for all of us gathered here as well. You're welcome, it said, meaning that now that you've been to the dungeons, now that you've sensed just a sliver of that darkness, everything must change. Welcome, it said, which at least for me meant that now that you've understood that God was somehow in the thick darkness, just the way Exodus has it, your reading of the Bible will change. Your reading of the culture around you will change. Your understanding of what constitutes beauty will change. Everything will look different. It is not to replace one binary with another, where instead of light being good and dark being bad the opposite becomes true. It's not that. Rather, it's to come to a deeper awareness of the complex interplay between light and dark, and

to sense that God is somehow at work in both, but especially there in the dark. Welcome to the darkness, the sign might have read.

I'm only beginning to sense the profundity of our journey. Its effects shall continue to unfold, for all of us. For my part, I'll continue to read the Gospel of John, and probably Plato too, though with a new wariness about how some of those symbols of light and dark were put to use. And when Christmas Eve arrives once again, and the lights go out, and the candles are lit, I shall try to imagine that God is far more a part of the darkness than the light. For in truth, it is the light that serves to reveal the thick darkness...where God is.