

I'm going to begin with a bit of an embarrassing confession: I've always been afraid of the dark. It's a bit of a joke within my family, my dislike of walking through enclosed dark spaces, the nighttime hallway of my childhood home, the cavernous darkness of churches and school buildings afterhours, and yes even the Creatures of the Night exhibit at the Henry Doorly Zoo – I really only made it through that particular experience the first time clutching my mother's hand for dear life. And yes, if you do the math, I was well into my 20s for that one. But it's a fear that has thankfully decreased in severity as I've grown older... and out of necessity, as I find myself more and more often in the cavernous darkness of churches afterhours.

Out of doors, I'm totally fine. There are stars and heavenly bodies and dancing fireflies to keep me company there.... but inside, with walls and a roof to block out the night air, with extra shadows for unseen threats to lurk within and the indoor kind of quiet that always precedes the appearance of ax murderers on horror movies, I confess to, on occasion, being a little skiddish and to searching for the nearest light switch at the earliest possible moment, breathing a quick sigh of relief when the light floods in to illuminate the shadowy places.

I'm not alone in this, I know. Fear of the dark is one of the most common of phobias, usually beginning around the age of 2, and diminishing over time and through the development of rational thought. But in defense of those of us who struggle with this particular fear, it's not entirely our fault, Throughout human history, this dichotomy of dark being bad and light being preferred has been established for us over and over again through the

narratives that teach us how to live our lives. In grand epic and silly children's story alike, the presence of light is to be revered, while the absence of it is to be feared. The walk through a deep dark woods to the witch's house. A heroine portrayed as being bathed in light and warmth, while the villain is wearing a dark cloak, shrouding his identity from view. Darkness signifies mystery, and not necessarily the fun kind. Moments of a questionable nature. In our Bible, some of the most earth shaking moments take place during the darkness of nighttime. Jacob wrestles with an angel all night long, surviving the match and getting a blessing and a new name out of the deal. The exodus happens at night, the Red Sea is parted at night, Jesus in the garden of gethsemanie, etc. Darkness is a time of trial and mystery, while Light is the aspiration and the saving grace when the darkness gets to be too much. The hero moves ever forward into the light and all is right with the world.

Using this kind of either/or imagery is the way we as Christians tend to make order of our world: good vs. evil. Innocent vs. sinister. Sacred and profane, spirit and flesh, and yes, light vs. dark. The reading from today urges us to put away the “works of darkness in favor of the armor of light.” In her book *Learning to walk in the dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about how these pairs make order of the world by placing half of each pair closer to God and the other half further away. Placing the world into two opposing categories makes the task of navigating the journey of life a little more bearable, but it also gives us a strong sense of purpose. It's the classic struggle, and We get

battles of glory and righteousness, large and small, to engage in. In this structure, the more we force darkness into submission, or the more we win out over the world of the flesh, the closer we get to God. And the quicker and less painful we make that move, the better. The discomfort of darkness is something to be avoided at all costs.

But at our Advent planning party this year, we decided that it was important for us at First Central to begin our journey into the light by wading around through this darkness of our existence a bit. The best way to begin any journey is to begin right where you are, and we as individuals and as a family and community of faith have certainly had our share of darkness this year. Many of us here in this space find ourselves engulfed in the darkness of a grief journey on this holiday season: We have newly empty dinner table chairs,... designated pew seats now left vacant to contend with. We have family photos that feel incomplete, holiday traditions and rituals that we don't quite know what to do with anymore, favorite dishes that we no longer need to make but feel weird not making. And let's be real for just a moment: the entirety of the darkness of grief is weirdand awful and super awkward, struggling to find the words to say to people experiencing it, and those experiencing it struggling to find the words to say about it. And all the while we are attempting to figure out how to navigate this weird new world with a human shaped void in the middle of it... and that's hard enough without having the overwhelming, permeating cheer of the approaching holiday to try to put a smile on for.

If this sounds remotely familiar to you at this point in the year... well, it

does for me too. I got you. I lost my dad in May, shortly before I came here, and to say that I'm not entirely looking forward to this first Holiday season without him there is a major understatement. For those of us walking through the nagging daily darkness of grief this Advent, it is a daily reality that, despite our best efforts and the egg nog and the twinkly lights and garish neighborhood holiday displays, we may not be ready to part completely with yet. It's harder to get to that place, where we can feel the joy in anywhere near the same way we have in years past.

Surrounded by the light of joy and holiday cheer, I think the darkness we experience can even get amplified a bit. It bumps up against the light and happiness of the season, and our worries can seem steeper, our wounds can seem deeper, our fears of the future become more visceral. When we compare our grief or our sorrow or our disappointment, our anger, our heartache, all that dark stuff, to the joy and light of the holiday, the shadows in the darkness shift slightly. Because again, grief is just weird and awkward, and the most awkward part of the grief journey during the holidays is how often the dark and the light, the sorrow and the joy, the anger and the laughter, occupy the same space almost simultaneously.

I've thought about this a lot in the past few days, and I think one could maybe argue that it's in these moments in which we are grieving loss or walking through darkness, bumping up against the light unbidden, that we are at our most utterly human. To be human is to live in both the sunlight and the moonlight, with both fear and delight, seeing the limits before us and pushing through them, transcending them, falling to our knees and getting back up

again. I suppose to only seek half of those experiences, to validate only the light part of them, is to only seek or validate half of a life, locking the other half away so it won't bother the “should be's” and the “ought to be's” of existing.

But in truth, while we are busy dividing up our lives into light and dark, either or, this or that, we are actually living in the grey areas. Where grief and joy are only two sides of a multifaceted coin of existence.

And it seems only right to me personally, at this point in my life and in the life of this congregation that Advent begins in the grey areas of humanity. The ambiguity of simply existing in this world where such joy and such sorry can exist simulatenously. Because as I sojourn through this particular Advent, tinged with the darkness that grief provides, I find myself armoring my being with this little glimpse of light: that within the greyest of grey areas of our lives might just reside a hint, a whif, a tidbit of possibility.

Advent is a time of waiting and wishing, hoping and wondering, breath holding and truth seeking, of both peril and possibility. A time of remembering where we came from, the darkness and the light of what we've experienced in the past year and before, and imagining what could come or will come in the future. The hope part of Advent. These grey, murky, shadowy places are often where the grandest journeys begin. And yes, beginnings can be scary and dark or crazy and colorful, or whatever, but they are actually always places of possibility. When you don't quite know what is coming at you, you are set free to imagine new ways of being, to remember old ways and Christmases and holidays and years gone by. To listen for that

cry in the shadows, to look for a glimpse of light in the darkness, a spark that helps us imagine ourselves living into that light after all, protects us from the overwhelming darkness that threatens to take over everything.

I think that's the kind of light armor this letter to the Romans today is talking about. Advent is about waiting and watching and praying for something new, some light shining in the darkness leading us ultimately.... into hope. And that light of hope is not something we have to endeavor to deserve – indeed, if light had to be earned, who could ever actually earn it – but it's just there. right there, waiting for us to lean into it a little bit. We may indeed start in darkness, and if that's where you're at, I encourage you (and me too) to be gentle with ourselves and take our time over the next few weeks to roll around in that scary darkness for a little bit. The darkness we feel is valid, and an inevitable part of being humans. but The cool thing about our Advent journey is that we don't make it alone. We are a community of faith, after all. We walk together in the grey areas, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, and all that. If all else fails, if we find ourselves failing, we can take each other by the hand and lean into the light together. I think... I THINK.....That's what Advent is all about.