

“Presence”

**Sermon from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Night*
Given Sunday, July 10, 2022
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor**

You, darkness, of whom I am born—

*I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illuminates
and excludes all the rest.*

*But the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations—just as they are.*

*It lets me imagine
a great presence stirring beside me.*

I believe in the night.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

—

I’d invite you to close your eyes, and hear that one more time -
(re-read Rilke).

What is the darkest place you’ve been?

Have you been to camp, and had to walk back to your cabin after singing and making s'mores around the fire? Maybe you all sat at the fire until the last flickers had gone out, maybe you'd stomped out any still-glowing embers, and then turned to walk away, and felt yourself enter the magic of the nighttime forest? Have you driven Highway 101 at night, felt the distance between the towns that dot the Oregon coastline - so dark you'd have no idea where you were if your windows weren't rolled down, so you can smell the ocean air, hear the waves crashing? When we were promised comets would be visible a few years ago, did you head out to the sign that marks the site of the old schoolhouse on Masonville Road, for the best view? Just a couple of miles out of town, but you might as well be nowhere... In dark like that, have you imagine d a great presence stirring beside you?

A few years ago, Rick and the boys and I were at Glacier National Park. We'd logged twelve miles in the daylight, and seen what I can only call the vastness of creation. Sloping mountains and rising peaks and grasses and wildflowers covering the lower parts, giving way to rocky landscapes

dotted with mosses as we gained elevation. Lakes below and snowpack above. It was so big, and so much. We were in awe.

And that night, we came to the visitor's center parking lot for an astronomy program put on by the park rangers. I remember the telescope they brought, big enough that we had to climb a portable staircase to look through it. I remember the cold that had fallen, so we were dressed in winter layers even though we'd been sweating in the sun on our hike earlier that day.

Most of all, I remember the tiny laser-pointer that the ranger held in his hand - the kind you shine the red light on the floor or the wall with to play with your cat. The ranger pointed it at the sky, at the myriad stars above us, and we stood in a circle around him, and he circled the stars with that red light as he told us their stories.

And the stories about the stars were fascinating - the different meanings given by different peoples and from different eras - but what I couldn't get over was the fact that the ranger held the light in his hand, and we could see the circles he drew with it in the sky. The darkness made the distance so easily crossable. It was another world, and it was right here. Where

in the light, the park had seemed so vast, in the dark, it felt like I could reach out and touch the stars.

What is the darkest place you've been?

There's another way to answer that question, right? What is the story of a time you've been without any joy? Without any hope? Without any trust that things might one day be different than they are today? With only a sense of being weighed down by the cruelty, the inhumanity, the greed that seems to dominate every story, determine every interaction - the space where, like we talked about last week, you don't have words to voice your pain, but your soul groans in a way you pray God understands...

What is the darkness we are all born from?

The poet personalizes it - "You, darkness, of whom I am born" - and we are taken back to the very beginning: to the waters of creation that swirl, to that earliest story of endless possibility where God calls all things, and you and me, into being.

Are we born from all of it, though? The possibility and the pain? Is the power that holds all of that, together, the presence of God?

Six years ago, on New Year's Eve, Sikh faith leader and activist Valarie Kaur mourned on a national stage that she feared she was leaving her son a world more dangerous than the one her grandfather had known when he came to this country from India. The conditions she described are ones we still witness today:

- As we enter an era moment of enormous rage
- As white nationalists hail this moment as their great awakening...
- As hate acts against Sikhs and others are at an all-time high
- And Black bodies are still seen as criminal
- And Brown bodies are still seen as illegal
- And Trans bodies are still seen as immoral
- And Indigenous bodies are still seen as savage
- And women's and girls' bodies are still seen as somebody else's property...

She warns that, when we see these bodies not as brothers and sisters and siblings, it becomes easy to act in unspeakable ways against them, to create unthinkable policies about them... But she says that she cannot give up. She cannot give up on the good she also knows, the good she also sees, the way the she knows the whole world is groaning toward something else.

And so the mother in me asks, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

It’s a question that she and others have asked many times since she first voiced it six years ago. What if this darkness is not death but rebirth? What if it is not danger but embrace? And today, other leaders are answering her question, saying: it’s both.

Some of what currently lives in and among us needs to be put to rest, some of it needs to die - we can probably name those things. But there is more - more that is coming to be, more that is yearning to be born.

And that both - that darkness that lives, like the poet said, beside us - but also within us, also within each one here and each one we encounter - that darkness is one way to imagine God, one way to imagine that presence that contains, as some of you named last week, all that is. Even Paul says it, when he comes to the people in Athens, who he says are religious in every way, so much so that they have a shrine erected to an unknown God, he tells them:

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for, and find God—though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For “In God we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are God’s offspring.”

We've said this season that within every image of God is an invitation. Sometimes that invitation is to *do something* - to advocate in a particular way, to pursue a specific path, to practice solidarity with a certain people. This one has its own invitation...

I'd ask you to close your eyes one more time - to let yourself sink into this darkness here, now. This image of God - this presence in whom we live and move - just invites us to be. It lets us imagine a greatness stirring beside us. It invites us to be present ourselves, to that greatness and the possibilities held in all that is yet unknown; it invites us to trust that even through the pain, what holds us also means us well, is bringing something to birth within us; and it invites us to rest in that trusting imagination. Amen.