

Sermon Palm Sunday Year A 2026 (All Saints); Matthew 26:14-27:2

The Dark Night of the Soul

In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our friend Jesus is in big trouble. I think he has entered into a dark time in his life. More on that later. First I want to tell you a story about a man named John of the Cross, and of the experience he described as “The Dark Night of the Soul.” John was a monk who lived in Spain in the sixteenth century. His story tied to that of another saint, that being Teresa of Avila. She was a vivacious, mischievous, life-loving young girl. After a series of undiagnosed illnesses she renounced her indiscreet lifestyle and became a nun in the Carmelite order—a very active and outspoken one at that. Her spirited life and writings attracted the attention of the Inquisition, that powerful and brutal office set up within the Catholic Church to root out and punish heresy. She is probably best known as a mystic and the author of the book The Interior Castle, in which she describes her 7 stages of spiritual development. Throughout her life she experienced numerous often ecstatic supernatural states with visions, including encounters with the Christ Jesus himself. Now enter John of the Cross. By the time Teresa met John he was a twenty-five year old priest, 27 years younger than Teresa. The two became close companions and both dedicated their lives to a contemplative path of prayer and action. As was Teresa, John was at constant odds with the religious establishment of his day. On the night of December 2nd of 1577 monks of his own Carmelite order broke into his room at the convent, abducted him, and led him blindfold to a monastery in Toledo, farther north in Spain. When he refused to renounce his work with Teresa, he was beaten and thrown into the monastery prison where he survived on little more than bread and water, could not bathe or change clothes, and only left his cell to be flogged by other monks. In this state of solitary confinement, with the only light being a slit in his prison wall, he began to compose his greatest works—first by memorizing the words in the dark and later, thanks to a kind jailer, by writing

them down. He escaped after nine months of confinement, fled to the south of Spain, and continued to write down what he had learned in the dark. His numerous poems are beautiful, but his most famous work is called The Dark Night of the Soul.

Have you heard the phrase “the dark night of the soul?” I want to talk about that this morning. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines dark night of the soul as “a term used in spiritual theology to indicate periods when one loses a sense of God’s presence.”(sic) The dark night of the soul means different things to different people. Some use the phrase to describe the time following a great loss, while others remember it as the time of anxiety, uncertainty, loss of purpose. Whatever the circumstances, what happens is that the person loses a sense of God being present. By circumstances beyond our control, the soul—our connection to God—is severely tested, often to the point of losing faith. We become lost. The dark descends, and we are left trying to find our way through it. Perhaps some of you have had such times. I have—when I can’t seem to find God. One of the hardest things to decide is whether to resist it—to control it by trying to “fix” whatever you think might be causing it—or to just surrender to it, to surrender in the hope that even though we can’t sense it, God is somehow still there. That can be hard. The choice often comes down to what you believe about God and how or even if God acts, which means that every dark night of the soul involves wrestling with belief—and ultimately with faith.

The widely acknowledged master of this dark night is John of the Cross. Most people who hear the name of John’s book assume that it is the memoir of a survivor describing the worst period of his life. They—and we—have been programmed to think of “dark” as a synonym for “sinister.” They expect John to tell them how awful it was and how he got through it by hanging on to his faith in God no matter what happened to him. But it is more than just that. In the first place John has very little to say about religion. For him the dark night is a love

story, albeit an often painful while at the same time joyful one, full of seeking a God who seems to have left. In the second place, he is no help at all to anyone seeking a better grip on God. This is no “how to find God in the midst of trouble” guide. One of the central functions of the dark night is to convince those who grasp after things that God cannot be grasped. In John’s native language Spanish, his word for God is *nada*, which means “no thing.” God is not a thing. And since God is not a thing, God cannot be held on to. God can only be encountered as that which surpasses the reality of all other things, as the ultimate reality which is beyond our understanding. This means that John does not try to teach about God by saying what God is. That would only reinforce the misguided idea that we can truly understand God by using our man made images of and thoughts about God. And so John works in the opposite direction. He teaches by saying what God is not, hoping to convince his readers that their images of and ideas about God can in fact be obstacles between them and the Real Thing. It reminds me of the quote by St. Augustine, “If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.” I know this may sound kind of deep and confusing, and it is for me too. But in fact in some ways it comes as a big relief. There is so much about God that I not only cannot understand, but also that I don’t have to understand. It is OK to “not know.” So, the dark night of the soul need not be sinister or negative. Rather, it offers enlightenment, even transformation.

One of my best friends was a “know it all.” He had to always be right. He had to have the last word, albeit it usually in a friendly way. It took a long time, but he finally realized that admitting that he didn’t know something was OK. It was liberating for him. I’ll never forget how his face lit up the first time he said “I don’t know!” And then smiled. By embracing the “I don’t know!” about God, and also about what the church throughout the millennia has decided about God—for instance in the words of the Nicene Creed and other doctrines—I too feel liberated to simply embrace the Presence which is always here. I am not

describing a loss of faith in God or in Christ here. Far from it, I am becoming free to experience that Real Truth, that Real Life, that Real Love—in the words of others the Ultimate Reality—as I encounter it in life. Barbara Brown Taylor went through something like this, and I credit her for much of what I say today. In her words “After so many years of trying to cobble together a way of thinking about God that makes sense so that I can safely settle down with it, it all turns to *nada*. There is no permanently safe place to settle. I will always be at sea, steering by stars. Yet as dark as this sounds, it provides real relief, because it now sounds truer than anything that came before.”

Dr. Gerald May was a psychiatrist, spiritual counselor and author. He also wrote a book called The Dark Night of the Soul. In it he explores the connection between darkness and spiritual growth. One of the features of the dark night is losing our sense of certainty of who or what God is. He says that “not knowing” is one of its greatest gifts, and that to be immersed in mystery, while distressing at first, over time provides immense relief. In his book May walks us through the “dark night,” a process of letting go of addictive control, accepting powerlessness and vulnerability, and discovering an unexpected freedom and identity. He reminds us that the dark night leads to a dawn of awakening. May died after his bout with cancer in 2005 at the age of 64. In his final days and weeks, talking about his sense of God’s presence throughout his illness, he said “I love it and surely would hate to lose it. But I know it is not God. It is only a sense of God. If at some point I do lose this sense of presence, I hope I will be given the wisdom to continue to trust God in the absence of any sense of God.” That would be finding a way through the clouds of the dark night of the soul.

I venture to say that the Church as a whole, at least organized Christianity, may be experiencing a dark night of the soul. For many people the old ways of being Christian are not working so well anymore, not only for most of our younger people, but for some who are old themselves. Something seems to have died. And yet at the same time something new is being born. Most people

refer to this “something new” as “Emerging Christianity.” The one thing most emerging Christians will say is that the faith they inherited from their elders is worn out. For many, doctrines and creeds are no longer enough to keep faith alive. For them, true faith is not about what they believe, or were taught to believe. Things like: “Do you believe in the virgin birth?”, “Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins?”, “Do you believe that only Christians go to heaven?” Those questions no longer have meaning. Questions about faith are different, things like: “What is the hope that gives meaning to your life?”, “What does it mean to be fully human?” “What powers do you most rely on?” They are seeking practical guidance and direct experience of the sacred. These people are still seeking something divine. But because the old ways do not work for them, they are looking for a different way to find it. If this is indeed their dark night of the soul, then John of the Cross would tell them that there is no simple answer. But he would also say that the dark night is God’s best gift, intended for their liberation. It is about freeing them from their old worn out ideas about God, their attachment to all the benefits they have been promised for believing in God, their dedication to doing all the “right things” to please God, their attempts to manipulate and control God, and their cures for doubting God. John would say all those things are substitutes for God. They are not the real thing. They get in God’s way. Gerald May called them addictions.

The reading you heard this morning from Matthew’s gospel is the beginning of the Passion narrative. Come back on Good Friday to hear its ending. Surely the experience of Jesus we heard this morning, and will hear more about in the coming days, was a time of darkness. It was a time when as followers of Jesus if we had been there to witness it then, or even as we hear it now, leaves us with a sense of God’s absence, not presence. How could these things be happening to the son Jesus? Where was God in the midst of the madness and suffering during the passion? I hesitate to go further, because we have not yet heard the end of the story. But, if we take the liberty of calling this

experience of Jesus a dark night of the soul, then as we will see it leads to liberation, to transformation, to new life. As Jim said this past Tuesday night, John's gospel sees Jesus's death and the cross as the glorification of God. No, while perhaps our sense of God's presence during this Jesus's last week in Jerusalem may seem to dissipate, that Presence itself has not, and will not. Our religion has a lot to say about losing as the pre-condition for finding, about death as a prerequisite for new life. We will soon see how this story ends.

Rev. Bob Donnell

(Sources: Learning to Walk in the Dark, Barbara Brown Taylor)

The Dark Night of the Soul, Gerald G. May, M.D.)