

## Ash Wednesday Meditation Feb 14 2018

Tim Carson

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, she spends a goodly part of her first chapter just exploring what she means by the dark, and most of it, the lion's share, comes down to this: *Fear*. The dark usually holds what makes us fearful, and whether these things are actual threats or only what we imagine, that's what lives there. Then she starts to boil down what she fears in the dark: the absence of God, or dementia or the loss of those dearest to her. Make your own list.

Certainly Ash Wednesday is a place just like that and by design. Those ashes tell a story and it's not cheerful. We are walked right into the dark and what we fear there, too. And then we wear them on our foreheads, the truth revealed, out in the open for everyone to see; the hair of the dog that bit you. But that's not all that's there. This is not only the domain of fear. This is also the locale of revelation.

Taylor also says, "I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light."(5)

And we need the darkness as much as the light, too, because it gives what its opposite cannot. Shadowy Ash Wednesday offers things we could never find in the bright daylight.

In the reading from Psalm 53 we hear the Psalmist aghast that humanity is so broken-stick dumb; the Lord of the universe looks deep into the creation and finds few who have any idea who they are or where they came from: "A fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.'"

And God asks rhetorically, "Is there no one who understands?" This is like a tree not knowing the earth in which its roots are buried or a fish not knowing in what it swims. Do you, human creature, not know what it is in which you live and move and have your being?

Here in some dark interval between God's knowing and our not knowing is God's longing that we would attain both wisdom and knowledge. Is it possible?

We may be required to search in the dark for the things can never be known in the light – like ashes, for example.

Perhaps there is telling wisdom to be found through the partial light of dusk or twilight. And maybe this is not the dark that agitates our deepest fears. Could this be not the darkness of a tomb but of a womb? Is this the dark of birth, new birth?

In so many churches and so many seasons the lights are always turned full on, so bright that you couldn't see the stars against their dark background if you wanted to. What if we turned down the light in order to learn from what the darkness has to teach us?

What we know from astrophysics is that there is much, much more dark matter and dark energy compared to the visible variety.

Most of the mass of the universe is dark; an invisible field that determines everything you can see.

And so it is in the life of the Spirit. We pause on what could be described as the darkest observance in the Christian year, except for perhaps Good Friday. Doves of people avoid them because they are. But here, in the ashes and dim light, are buried the deepest and often unrecognized truths. Like the dark energy of the universe they remain unseen and unknown.

But today we stop and beckon the darkness to become our teacher. As we rest here in its truth – about life and what makes it worth living, about its end and what makes it so urgent – we become disciples of the dark, receiving gifts only it can provide.

If we listen, watch and wait, we might receive unconventional wisdom, a new language of faith, and even a new way forward. Just because you can't see as well in the dark it doesn't mean that you are alone. It just means that you need to navigate

differently, by faith and not by sight. And maybe that is the gift we find in the shadows and Ash Wednesday – learning to trust the One who is there though we may not know this like we know everything else. We might even topple some of the false gods we've grown accustomed to in the daylight, gods that have become like habits that don't work anymore.

If this is the gift of the dark then we should ready ourselves to receive it. We smear some ashes on our faces and say that we don't have all the answers or any of them or much time to look. That may be the beginning of wisdom, this turn.