

Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed. Sometimes, I know I'm the only one here. I just want to sink into my own space and place. It's that feeling after a long weekend of traveling or a week on camp outs or sleeping on the floors for mission trips, that all I want to do is spend a night in my own bed, with the smell of my own pillow. Well when we glide down the last big hill coming in our neighborhood, it's like we slip away into our own world, our own bit of country smack in the middle of the city. All it often takes is the hooting of our neighborhood owl and my soul comes out of hiding, and opens in the dark like a night-blooming flower.

When we first moved into our house on Lynnwood, we started to meet the neighbors; little did I know that I was also causing trouble.

You see, we have a back deck with a fenced in area for our dogs, and I used to let them out at night. There was a night early on where I accidentally left them outside all night, and there they were noses smushed up against the sliding glass door in the morning wondering what happened. So I did what I thought was a little thing, at night I left the back porch light on when the dogs were outside. Then after I was done reading, or relaxing streaming something, I could glance out the back door, and light on equals dogs still outside, light off all good.

Little did I know that was one of the least neighborly things I could do. Until one day I got an email from one of my neighbors heartbroken, over a porch light. My first reaction was what's the big deal? Even with a light on the deer will still come up and snack on your hostas, in fact it's just a little extra light for them to use to see which leaves are the most tender-looking.

And yet...

I was stealing my neighbor's darkness.

You see our row of houses backs up to the creek, and beyond the creek is a spur of the trail, so during the evening and night hours you can let the moonlight shine in your windows as you fall to sleep. And I was that annoying neighbor with their porch light taking the pleasure out the night, like a cloud on your late-night stroll looking for falling stars.

I was stealing their darkness.

Barbara Brown Taylor, has a delightful section of her book where she reminds us that we too can be hampered by brilliance. We can have such a thing as too much light in our lives, darkness turns out to be as essential to our physical well being as light. We not only need plenty of darkness to sleep well; we also need it to be well. Our circadian rhythm displays it, waking and sleeping affects everything, and there is plenty of research that shows just how critical this rhythm is to our lives, I read plenty of it this week, and I was going to fill my sermon with statistics telling you all about it, and then I thought...

We don't need a lot of scientific research to know this is true, we each know this is true by being out under the stars. All it takes is a night lying on your back at camp, or a moment alone on your back porch, anywhere you can see the night sky.

Sometimes when I have trouble sleeping I like to stand out on my back deck, and look up through the trees; to gaze upwards. And I'm convinced that the night sky has curative properties; it has that way of reminding us of our place in the universe. I love looking up at the same stars that human beings have been looking at for millennia. It reminds me of my place near the end of a long, long line of stargazers who stood here looking upward before me.

Glancing up and watching the wobbly W of Cassiopeia pointing to Andromeda. Seeing the North Star in the handle of the little dipper point straight to the cup of the big dipper, as if it pouring my very soul between those enormous starlight cups. Long after we are gone, the stars will still be here, showing others their place, their bearings in this world.

Our biblical story today centers on the Apostle Paul, traveling the road under his given name Saul, on the road to Damascus. You've likely heard of this story, about the guy whose life is transformed, his path is changed one day upon a dusty road. It is one of the most iconic conversion stories in all of the biblical narrative. A man, angry and vindictive, is traveling down looking for trouble, rooting out Jesus followers at every turn, and yet, Jesus appears to him, and knocks him down into darkness, changing the course of his life forever.

Saul, turned Paul, becomes the conversion story of reference, the exemplar version, but I think one specific detail we often overlook. The 3 days that scripture tells us that Paul is left in darkness.

In this Lenten season, we take on the challenge to spend the effort and the time to clear out things from our path, to remove distractions, to center our hearts and minds, to prepare for the passion, death, and ultimately resurrection of Jesus on Easter.

During this season, we've been inviting you to learn to walk in the dark, and I hope that you've begun to see that it is more than just a great title to a book. I hope that you've begun to understand that darkness, while often hard and overwhelming, and yes even scary at times, can and needs to be a part of our faith.

Too often in our lives we're taught that we need to be bright and shiny, that all the "best" things in life are lively, effervescent. But during this season of Lent, this journey in the wilderness, this purifying time in our faith journey, I want you to remember garlic.

I was listening to a podcast the other day, and the guest on there was one of these agriculture guys. A “salt of the earth” type, a young guy who runs a non-profit organization in Grand Rapids Michigan, not so unlike our own Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture. He runs an urban farm on a small acre of formerly blighted land in an old industrialized area of his city. They have created a place where people can come together on a community farm. Their stated goal is to cultivate durable and resilient families, communities and ecosystems through urban agriculture. It seems to me to be a natural place in an unlikely, but necessary, spot.

When the interviewer asked him to tell us about his favorite plant, or food that does the most amazing thing on its own. He said that ever since he was little, he has loved growing garlic. Not only because all good meals begin with sautéed onions and garlic, though there is that...then he began to teach on garlic, he talked about the different types and then he spoke of the garlic that they grow in Michigan, that thrives in the colder climate zones.

Garlic, apparently, is what he referred to as a bi-annual, or has a two-year growing cycle. He loves it because you actually plant garlic in the fall, between October and end of November. Garlic has to have cold and time of just sitting still to develop roots. That's it. The first thing it does is develop roots, without any expectation. It's in no rush. It just takes its time. And then as the snow starts to peel back, the sun starts to come out and the days begin to lengthen. Then you start to see the first shoots of garlic, and every year it happens. To farmers in those cold climates, when those shoots begin to emerge giving hope in those cold climates.

Then it grows and the stalks begin to form, and it flowers, those are called the scapes. The scapes actually have a mild pungent garlic flavor to them. Then the gardener harvests them, and you can eat them. But this is the amazing thing, that by removing the flower, by taking away the seedpod, the plant naturally puts more energy into the bulb. So the bulbs actually get significantly bigger once you harvest the flower, the scape.

Then you harvest garlic around the middle of July or so, and you hang it up, curing it, storing it, but then you take those same bulbs and you break them apart and replant those again in November.

It's just this constant unfolding. This cycle, this need. What stood out to me, a non-gardening type, was listening to this man describe this process, this cycle. It was interesting to me that something that has such a unique taste, something so amazing that makes so many different things better, when you hear about what you don't know about it, that's as interesting as how it tastes.

Garlic, this beautifully complex and wonderful spice, requires months and months of sitting in the cold dark earth, to come forth. Garlic would, quite literally, be hampered by the light, hampered by brilliance. This brilliant spice cannot come about without darkness.

It's so grounding to consider this, could the Apostle Paul become the Apostle Paul that writes most of the New Testament, the one that almost single handedly transforms a fledging movement into one that would spread across the globe be possible without those three days of blindness?

The biblical writers don't tell us a lot about Paul's three days in the tomb, if you will, but we can imagine, we can draw our own conclusions. But if you spend more than just a few years walking this life, then you know about this darkness.

One of my favorite Authors, Anne Lamott says that *"under the moonlight, you can make your shadow enormous. You feel both tiny and big. You can stagger around making huge shadows ... You can make yourself as small as a doll, as big as a Cyclops. It's like you brought a whole cast of scary troll characters with you into the moonlight, which you can bring forth at your pleasure, all these aspects of who you were inside all along.*

*We, too, are shadow and light. We are not supposed to know this, or be all these different facets of humanity, bright and dark. We are raised to be bright and shiny, but there is meaning in our acceptance of our dusky and dappled side, and also in defiance."*

Friends, we must learn to walk in the dark, not because we are afraid of it, or maybe even when we are afraid of it, but because it has something to offer. Sometimes in life we can't always see the light, it waxes and wanes or can seemingly go out all together. What we need is a spirituality that works in the nighttime, as well as the light.

The great wisdom teacher Pema Chodron diagnoses this well. She says we are often so busy constructing zones of safety that keep breaking down, that we hardly notice where all the suffering is coming from. We keep thinking the problem is out there, in the things that scare us; dark nights, dark thoughts, dark guests, dark emotions. If we could just defend ourselves better against those things, we think, then surely we would feel more solid and secure. But of course, we are wrong about that, as experience proves again and again. The real problem has far less to do with what is really out there.

Perhaps we as Christians, need to think again on the conversion story of Paul. We need to think that Saul doesn't become Paul because he creates safety and security. Saul becomes Paul because God chooses him, and walks with him, and transforms him in three days of darkness.

What can we learn about our fear by staying with it for a moment before turning on the lights? Where can you feel the fear in your body? What stories do you tell yourself to keep your fear in place? What helps you stay conscious even when you're afraid?

For me, it is knowing that our God is a God of the tomb, a God on a cross, as well as the God who brings joy in the morning. At least, I keep trying to practice that, especially when I feel alone in the dark.