



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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JULY 12, 2020  
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Ordinary Lessons During Extraordinary Times: Faith Isaiah 55:10-13; Hebrews 11:1-3, 12:1-3

When Robert was six years old, he and I decided it was time for a boys-only camping trip. Actually, when we announced that we were going to camp out in a state park with rather primitive facilities, the girls decided it should be a boys-only trip!

We pulled into the park late afternoon on a Sunday early in June. As we drove in and began looking for the ideal camping spot, we noticed that there were only two other campsites with people on them. When the ranger came around later to get our information and collect our fees, he informed us that the other people had left and we would have the entire campground to ourselves. We set up our tent, got the boat into the water, and fished a bit.

After our traditional first night supper of sloppy joes, baked beans, and chips, we built a fire, made s'mores and talked a while. As it began to get dark, we lit our lantern and placed it on the picnic table beside the tent. There not being much else to do, and the fact that we were tired and were looking forward to the coming day of fishing and adventure, we went to bed. Lying in my sleeping bag took me back to my childhood and my days camping as a Boy Scout. Like the author E.B. White who wrote about taking his son fishing for the first time, for a moment, I did not know if I was the child or the adult.<sup>1</sup>

In the stillness and dark of the night, all the sounds of the woods and water became amplified. We were treated to a symphony of fish jumping, owls hooting, birds calling, and a dog barking as it walked along the beach. Suddenly, I became acutely aware of the fact that I was alone with a six year old in the middle of a state park. Fears started creeping in. What if something happened? How would I get help? These were the days before cell phones.

About that time I heard banging and a crash behind the tent and realized that someone or something was into the galvanized trash can on the

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<sup>1</sup>E.B. White, "Once More to the Lake," *Harper's Magazine*, 1941.

road. Lying still in the tent, I watched as a shadow passed by. Then the light from the lantern went out. It was completely dark and quiet. I held my breath not knowing what in the world to do. Suddenly the light returned! I peaked out of the tent flap and saw the largest racoon ever to walk the earth standing on the picnic bench in such a way that it had completely blocked the light. After a minute or two of curiosity, the beast ambled away toward the water and a more certain supper supply.

I lay back down, embarrassed by my fears and amazed by what I had seen. Lulled by the sounds of the night, I finally slept.

Several years ago, author, teacher, and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book titled, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. She reminds us that many of us from childhood on are actually taught to be afraid of the dark. We are called from play at dusk to come inside where it is safe. We are told to avoid going into areas where lighting is minimal. We are provided night lights and security blankets to fend off the dark and any creatures that lurk therein. Most of us have a multitude of flashlights, large and small, working and non-working to drag out of closets and drawers the moment the power goes off. We are taught the duality of darkness and light with light generally coming out the better.<sup>2</sup>

Since mid-March, for me, it has often felt as if the sun has set or some persistent eclipse has taken place. The light has gone out, a dark cloud has settled over us. Things aren't as clear as they once were. Our vision is obscured. Few things seem certain. The contours of life are difficult to distinguish in the shadows of the pandemic. Unrest, injustice, and an unsettled spirit have cast something like a pall over our nation. We find it hard to get our bearings as impatience, frustration, and calls for change increase. We often aren't quite sure what day it is or what we should do next or if this veil blocking the light will ever lift.

As I thought about what we have endured for the past three months and the uncertainty of what still lies ahead of us, I thought about that first camping trip with Robert. At first I was uncomfortable realizing that we were all alone in the campground. When the clanging and banging started and the light went out, I was downright scared for a few moments. When I was finally able to understand what was going on and the light of the lantern returned, I felt

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<sup>2</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 20-38.

secure and safe again. I have felt many of those same feelings over the past four months.

When I asked that you tell me what is going on with you these days, Karyl Marsigli wrote, “During this pandemic and the unrest in our country, I have learned how important faith is in my life. It is a constant and a comfort in a scary and changing world.” For me, and I suppose for many of you, faith is the light from the lantern that never really goes out but might get blocked from time to time. I am beginning to wonder, however, if faith is not the light at all. I am discovering, and I think this is what Karyl meant, that faith exists in the darkness as well. Perhaps faith is the ability to walk in the darkness as well as in the light. Maybe faith is being able to see what is visible in the dark as much as it is seeing what is visible in the light.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that stars can be seen only when it is dark. They are up there in the sky right now, but we cannot see them because of the light of the sun. When God assured Abraham that his promise would be fulfilled, he took him outside the tent and told him to look up through the darkness and count the stars. When his grandson Jacob was on the run for cheating his brother and deceiving his father, it was in the darkness of night that he saw angels coming and going on a ladder stretching to the heavens. And when God visited his people on Mount Sinai and delivered what we know as the Ten Commandments, he did not do so on a clear and sunny day. God spoke to Moses and the people out of the darkness of a thick and violent cloud.<sup>3</sup> When God wanted to speak with the boy Samuel, he did so at night, in the darkness of his chamber. When Jesus wanted to commune with his heavenly Father, he often went off to pray late at night or early in the morning in places that were dark and lonely.

As much as we love to talk about light and use it as a symbol of faith (And I certainly do!), our faith also teaches us not to fear the darkness but to learn from it. After all, our favorite psalm of them all, the one we can each recite from heart proclaims, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death (literally, ‘the valley of deepest darkness’), I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). As we just heard, the writer of Hebrews affirmed, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It is in the darkness of my life that I have to rely most on what I cannot always see but know that I can trust.

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<sup>3</sup>Taylor, 44-47.

I have spoken before of my great-uncle Bill, who truly was great in my eyes. My grandmother's brother, he studied to become a physician and, when a rare disease began to affect his sight, he returned to school and trained to become a psychiatrist. For many years, he taught at the University of Virginia and practiced psychiatry in Charlottesville. He was able to maneuver his home, his office, and the halls of the University with no problem. He once gave me a guided tour of Charlottesville and directed me at every turn as I drove around town and up into the mountains. He knew people by their voices and by their hearts. Although he lived in a world of darkness, he brought a great deal of light to the world. His life's work was to pay attention to the darkness inside of us and what he found there. He allowed the darkness to reveal truth to him as much as we depend on light to do the same for us.

Our faith is "a constant and a comfort in a scary and changing world." Yet, isn't that what faith is all about? If we knew all of the answers, if we could read the last page of the book of life, if we could see how everything turns out in the end, then faith would be unnecessary. Because of things like novel coronaviruses, pandemics, discrimination, abuse, unfairness, fear, hatred, and the like, we need faith to help us live in the darkness. We survive and thrive when we learn to see and walk in the dark. What do these dark times reveal to us? We have learned that we are more dependent on one another than we ever realized. We have learned that what we do or do not does have an impact on other people, one that can lead to life or to death. What makes these times dark? We have had to face the uncomfortable and tragic realities of racism and prejudice and discrimination which so easily fit into our daily lives. We have tripped over subtle attitudes that see other people as less than we are and we have bumped into a shared history that is not as glorious as we have been taught. There are plenty of scary things that go bump in the dark, but we do not always see them in the light. Sometimes it is only in the darkness that we confront the harder truths that are easily ignored in the light of day. The good thing is that our faith guides us to overcome them. Our faith helps us to navigate the darkness together so that we can see the light, distant though it may be, shining like a beacon to lead us on our way. That is faith, the faith in which all of life is anchored.

I know now that had I not depended on the light of that lantern to provide us with security as we camped alone so many years ago, Robert and I would have been better off. The light probably attracted the raccoon in the first place. It certainly made it more difficult for us to see the stars in the sky above and the moon reflected in the water of the lake. It probably hampered

our rest in some ways as the light kept telling our bodies that it was time to get up instead of to go to sleep. The darkness would have kept us just fine throughout the night if I had trusted it to do so.

In the same way, our faith will hold us through whatever darkness and light come our way because that is how God designed it. Our faith assures us that our hopes are secure and confirms for us all those things that we cannot yet see. Our faith helps us to walk through the darkness and the light because our faith is in God who is always with us. We are never alone—even in a deserted state park with a hungry and curious raccoon on the prowl.

May you discover that your faith is constant and comforting during the darkness and light of these days and all of the days and nights yet to come. Amen.

July 12, 2020

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Even on a day that is sunny and hot, we sometimes feel the chill of darkness run through us, O God. Especially as the coronavirus pandemic goes from weeks to months and—our greatest fear—perhaps even to years, a darkness settles over us that tomorrow's sunrise cannot lift. We are frustrated and frightened. We are weary and impatient. We are scared and haven't a clue as to what we should or should not do.

As you did with Abraham long ago, put your arm around us as we stand in this dark together, and invite us to lift our eyes to the heavens above. Remind us that all of those glittering stars have stories to tell and light that we can see only when it is dark. Assure us that your promises of life and goodness and grace remain just as sure and certain as the light of millions of stars that shine in the night. Remind us that you created us as partners to care for one another and the earth. Convince us that you have placed within each of us the abilities to overcome the challenges of each day and night.

For these gifts, we rejoice, O God, and know that we will overcome the pandemic and the social and economic challenges that are before us. Help us to see in the dark the problems that are ours and the solutions which are right before us. Teach us to walk together in order to find our way.

We continue to pray for the health and well-being of one another and for the life and safety of people the world over. We pray for people who risk their own lives so that we might be safe and healthy and we pray for people who have not yet learned how their actions can give or take life. Make us aware, we pray, of the angels who dwell among us.

We pray for cures and vaccines for the illnesses that plague us. We pray for remedies for the interpersonal ills which infect us. It sounds odd that we would ask you to keep us safe from one another, O God, but we do. Help us to find our way to that place where we finally thank you for the privilege of all being together in harmony.

We thank you for the work of Gatekeepers that will take place this week and we ask for your blessing on each youth and adult who will be a part. We pray for their safety and for the good they will do in your name.

Thank you, O God, for this good day and for the faith which keeps us steady and strong. Thank you for the gift of life through your Son our Savior. May we live worthy of that gift night and day. Amen.