

God's Holy Darkness – Laura Webb

Wall Street United Church

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(Book referred to: *'God's Holy Darkness'* by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick)

So, just out of curiosity—being the teacher type that I am—I'm wondering: how many of you remember one thing from the time I spoke last in early January? Good! We've got two people who remember! So really, I could leave now and call it a day, and you might not know what happened today.

But my friends, in early January, rather than talking about New Year's resolutions, I introduced this idea—and I want you to remember it, so I'm going to say it again: *each of you is indeed God's beloved child*. And as we live into our belovedness, God is with us. God is holding us when the rest of the world might seem a little bit overwhelmingly crazy. As God's beloved children, we are held.

So this morning, I'll say something else, and we'll test you in another couple of months to see if you're tracking with what comes out today. I have to admit that lately I've been feeling a little overwhelmed. I'm not sure I would have said yes to preaching this morning if I had known then what I know now — that there would be an illegal attack on Iran, further attacks on Lebanon and the people of Palestine, not to mention significant gas breaks here at home. And last weekend, when I thought I'd be preparing for this, I was super sick.

These days, there are mornings when I wake up, turn on the news, and hear Samia sharing the latest updates from around the world. I find myself wondering, *"What's wrong with the world? How do I respond? What do I do? How do I care?"* I feel like I should be the one fixing this.

And then there are moments when someone from the church calls or sends me an email because something has been miscommunicated, or a difficult decision has to be made, and the question is, *"What should we do?"* Sometimes I just don't know,

and four different opinions don't make it any easier. Things just seem that much more complicated.

I feel it in my work day to day, as I meet with people who are desperately looking for employment, and simply trying to make ends meet in order to survive. It can feel heavy. It can feel dark in my soul. Some days I just go, "Oh Lord, how much more?"

And then there's the weather! It's almost spring—and then it's not. I got my bike out two weeks ago, and yesterday I looked outside, saw six centimeters of snow, and thought, "Is this ever going to change?" You start to wonder, "When are we going to catch a break? When is it going to get easier? Will spring and new growth ever arrive?"

And I know it will. I just have to be patient. It's God's time. It's Kairos time.

Partway through this week, I began to feel better and thought, "Oh, I'd better prepare something for Sunday." I started looking at the scriptures in the lectionary. Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." I thought, "Yes, this is what I want to talk about—green pastures, comfort, something gentle and reassuring." But then I remembered it had been talked about in the last year.

Then I looked at a passage from Samuel, where Samuel is calling David—the one who would replace the king. I thought I could talk about that. That calling is pretty big. And although some days I feel like there's a big calling, it just didn't sit right with me. Then I looked at the passage from John and realized that if Paul had read the whole reflection—it was something like 42 verses—his reading might have been longer than my sermon!

So I found myself focusing on the passage from Paul to the Ephesians. I read it several times, and there was one theme that kept catching my attention: the movement from darkness to awakening.

"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord, my friends, you are light."

As I sat with this passage, I kept thinking about a book I came across a couple of winters ago called *God's Holy Darkness*. We were visiting my friend Aaron in Montreal. She used to be my assistant director at summer camp, and she was amazing—always had books for every reason. I was sitting at her kitchen table, saw this book, flipped through it, and thought, “This has some great images and messages.” So when I got home, I ordered a copy for myself, and I’m delighted to refer to it today.

Another book that came to mind was a little wordless book. Some of you may remember it if you grew up in a Baptist Sunday school. It told the story of the gospel through colors—yellow, black, red, white, and green.

But one of the colors that always bothered me was black, which represented sin or evil. We know historically that associating black with sin has been used to further racism, and it never sat well with me. It also didn’t sit well because I loved the dark. I loved the night. I loved walking outside in the dark and listening to the sounds of the night.

Later, when I became a summer camp director, some of my favorite moments were walking through the chalet lines or sitting on the dock, listening to the crickets, the frogs, and the water. In the darkness, you could hear things you never noticed during the busy daylight hours.

Even today, there’s nothing better than sitting outside around a campfire, enjoying the sounds of the night and seeing the open sky above.

Friends, the darkness holds beauty—beauty we often miss because we’re too busy during the day. We don’t take time at night to look up at the stars or feel the power of the full moon! Or perhaps we’re too afraid to go out into the dark to see what happens around us.

So when I read the line in Ephesians, “*You were once darkness,*” I find myself thinking about how often we misunderstand that word. So often in Christian

language, we contrast light and dark as if they simply mean good and bad—good versus evil.

But the truth is, darkness itself is not evil.

In fact, scripture tells us that some of God's most beautiful work happens in the dark. So I'm going to share a story from *God's Holy Darkness*, because it captures this better than I can.

Darkness and blackness and night are too often compared to lightness and whiteness and day and found deficient. But let us name the beauty and goodness and holiness of darkness and blackness and night.

God uses darkness and blackness and night to show love for the world.

Creation began in darkness. "In the beginning, darkness covered the face of the deep," and God brought all things into being. Creation is God's work done in holy darkness.

When Abraham began to doubt, God took him outside at night and said, "*Look at the stars—so shall your descendants be.*" Jacob wrestled with God through the night and was forever changed. The beginnings of nations came through God's beautiful darkness.

At night, God passed over Egypt and set the people free. Samuel heard God's voice in the dark and became a mighty prophet. When the temple was complete, Solomon said, "*The Lord dwells in thick darkness.*"

The Spirit of God dwells in holy darkness, where we are invited to be held in God's love.

Angels appeared to shepherds in the night. The disciples gathered with Jesus as day turned to night. When Jesus died on the cross, the sky went dark from noon until three.

Creation began in holy darkness, and new life in Christ began in the darkness of that day.

Rich black soil brings forth life. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone—but if it dies, it bears much fruit. The deep ocean holds more life than we have discovered. The vast darkness of space reminds us of the size of God's creation.

From the beginning of creation to the stars in the sky, from the soil to the sea, from promises made at night to the cross—these are the works of God's holy darkness.

God works in the darkness.

And so, back to Ephesians. It reminds us there is another kind of darkness.

“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

Here, Paul is not talking about the beauty of night or the mystery of creation. He is talking about the kind of darkness where harm hides—the kind where injustice thrives because it remains unseen, where systems avoid accountability.

This is the darkness we see around us.

My friends, this is the darkness Christ's light exposes—when we speak up against injustice and stand with the marginalized and the oppressed.

Perhaps the invitation is to learn the difference: there is the darkness where God is creating, and there is the darkness where harm is hiding. One is holy mystery; the other is secrecy that avoids truth.

It is so important that we learn the truth—that we understand history beyond a colonial perspective, that we stand up against injustice, that we stand with Indigenous peoples here in Canada and around the world.

I am so thankful that Christ's light does not destroy the night. Instead, it reveals what harms life so that it can be healed. May we, individually and collectively, be the balm the world needs.

Friends, the world feels pretty dark these days, and I'm increasingly frustrated that people are getting away with harmful actions—especially when done in the name of scripture.

But I am reminded of God's time—Kairos time. Somehow, God will bring healing and expose the truth. The truth will prevail. It always does.

We all carry heavy things. We all see things we feel powerless to change. And yet, this scripture reminds us that darkness is not the end of the story. Often, it is where God is still at work.

As a church, there are moments when we feel like we are in uncertainty—some might even call it darkness. But I believe God is still working here, in and through this community, just as God always has.

So we hear Paul's words again: *"Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!"*

When Christ's light shines on us, it doesn't stop with us—it shines through us. And when a community lives in that light—loving deeply, seeking justice, caring for neighbors, telling the truth, and offering hope—something beautiful happens.

We begin to shine.

We become, in Jesus' words, a city on a hill—a light that cannot be hidden, a community that reflects Christ's love into the neighborhood around us.

So may Christ awaken each of us. May Christ shine on us. And may this church, right here on Wall Street, continue to be a light on the hill that helps our community see the hope, the healing, and the love of God.

Amen.