

# **The Dark Night of the Soul**

**Good Friday Sermon**

**April 7, 2023**

“The Dark Night of the Soul.”

I knew the phrase before I knew the poem it is based on.

And when I read the poem, I didn’t really understand it. So, I read what scholars say about the poem and I don’t really understand them, either.

I know what I think when I hear the phrase or use it, “The Dark Night of the Soul.” Bad times, right? The kind that can break you. Or not.

Let’s go to the origin, then bring it back to ourselves.

“Dark Night of the Soul” comes from a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish mystic named “St. John of the Cross” possibly written while imprisoned in Toledo, Spain.

He begins, “En una noche obscura” ...” on a dark night.”

But surprisingly, the “dark night,” and all it entails and all it suggests are merely the trials and tribulations we face that result in our spiritual purification AND our spiritual advancement, ultimately leading to our union with God.

It’s a good thing! It’s a 500-year-old version of “what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger.”

The ancient poem concludes:

“Oh, night that guided me,

Oh, night more lovely than the dawn

Oh, night that joined my beloved with I, the Lover...

my face I reclined on the Beloved.

All ceased, and I abandoned myself,

Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies”

For St. John of the Cross, writing in 1577, from his prison cell in ancient Toledo, in the shadow of the Toledo Cathedral, probably the most majestic, dark, foreboding, otherworldly medieval Cathedral in the world, for him, the Dark is a good thing. It’s a prelude. The start. A beginning.

I was reading the Book of Genesis the other day. All the familiar, fun stuff begins with verse 3:

“And God said, ‘let there be light, and there was light.’”

And before you know it, we’ve got plants, and animals, and vegetation and yes, people. And they eat the apple and get kicked out of paradise and ... we’re off to the races, creating human history, good, bad, and ugly.

But I haven’t paid much attention to what comes before, verse 2:

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep.”

The earth was “formless and empty,” some translations say, “the earth was void,” one translation puts it, “the earth was chaos.”

Then, “boom!!”  
creation, and all its wonder  
all its glory  
all its potential  
all it’s delight,  
is brought into being,  
out of the chaos  
out of the void  
out of the deep.

That darkness, then, is the precursor, the steppingstone, the foundation of the brightness that lightens our journey, and the lightness that brightens our journey. St. John of the Cross wasn’t denying the reality of Darkness. But he was choosing not to be destroyed. In his own way he welcomed it, he turned it to his advantage, he was a “shapeshifter.”

What’s frightening about the Dark is that it does scary things to shapes and sounds. Things seem bigger, sounds seem scarier. I have a short story I’ve written that you’ll never see because it was frightening to write, to relive some night terrors that convinced me of house invasions by murderous invaders and it was all in the dark in my head.

I remember one night, I was in rural India, walking an unlighted path when I stumbled upon the world’s largest cobra, the deadly snake, reared up to its full height, 6 foot or more, it’s

hooded head full blown as it was about to strike. I froze in fear. A nurse came along behind me with a flashlight, showing my venomous 6-foot cobra to be a 3-inch bullfrog with puffed cheeks.

This is not to say that there can't be "darkness upon the face of the earth." The evening news and the morning newspaper and all the headlines in between pummel us all day, every day. All manner of evil is afoot. On the stationary bike, the world's most boring exercise, I watch bad movies to make the time go by, and this week it featured a battle-hardened counterterrorism superhero who's just plain fed up with life, and the world. She gives a long litany of world chaos right on target, right up to date, one awfulness after another. And she wants out, she's immortal, and she wants out. She can't see anything good emerging from this primordial darkness.

But Darkness is not a bad thing or a bad place, in and of itself. As young people put it, "it is what it is." That's the message of St. John of the Cross, "Dark Night of the Soul."

"It is what it is," so let's find purpose and make meaning and look for joy and love with faith. Whether the sun is up or down, the light is on or off. Whether we are sunbathing or sitting in the dark, "it is what it is," so here we are. Our church kicks off every September with our Penfield Party down by the beach. We've been there in near hurricane gales, torrential rain, and beautiful warm sunsets. No matter what, all the parties were great, the food was great, the music was great, the people were great.

And what has any of this to do with Good Friday? Good Friday is ostensibly the worst day of the year for Christians.

A Good Man,

an innocent man,

our Savior, was crucified. All the disciples except one abandoned him. Jesus, Himself, cried out to God. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

And darkness literally, literally blocked out the sun! All four Gospels report that for three hours, while Jesus was dying on the cross, "darkness came over all the land."

It was as though heaven AND earth were in mourning.

And yet, we call it "Good Friday," whatever the original meaning we know it as GOOD...Friday.

Aesthetically, the cross is the true center of our sanctuary, a beautiful, gold, triumphant cross. The cross is precious jewelry, worn with pride all over the world, no shame attached to it. They are shared as family heirlooms, given as gifts, prized and touched and revealed, proudly. The soul finds its liberation in the darkness, with the darkness, through the darkness, even Jesus' own "Dark Night of the Soul."

Trust me, I'm not downplaying our struggles. Nor do I believe that God does bad things to us to wake us up or shape us up. God doesn't say, "Here's sickness for you; here's a car accident for you, over there. Here's a job loss, a breakdown, a failure, a tragedy, a heartache." So much in life can feel like someone turned the light off, left us alone, in the dark, in the corner.

St. John of the Cross is saying

You're not alone, in the dark, in the corner.

Listen carefully.

Look closely.

Reach out gently.

See who's beside you.

Yes, it is the Holy Spirit of God.

Yes, the spiritual presence of Christ.

Yes, the memories,

the sounds,

the lessons of people dear to us;

Of wisdom, insight and experience,

Coming from the living

In this world,

Or the next.

"The Dark Night of the Soul," the sainted poet tells us, can be "the night that guides us."

This week I listened to an interview with the Retired Admiral William McCraven, the longest active-duty Navy Seal in history, 37 years as a Seal. In his book he shared what he calls "The Wisdom of the Bullfrog." Pithy, almost Book of Proverbs-like, he caught my attention from the get-go. "The easiest day of your life is yesterday," he said. The easiest day of your life is yesterday.

Echoing Jesus, he added “every day is full of troubles. But the very fact you have troubles today is proof that yesterday is over. You got through it, you learned from it, you’ve been guided by it, and you’re now in today. The “Dark Night” of yesterday has brightened your soul.

You’re ready for resurrection. You’re ready for today – and tomorrow. You’re ready for Easter.

That’s why Jesus’ final statement from the cross, given confidently, and triumphantly, I believe, the final statement was “It is finished.” As if to say, “I did my “Dark Night of the Soul,” I did it right. I did it well. Yes... I’m ready for my Easter.”