

Title: "Hope Grows in the Dark"

Big idea: Hope grows in the darkness—we trust in the growth and transformation that we cannot yet see. Jesus meets us in the darkness.

Invitation: Trust that God is with us in the darkness and that darkness is not the whole story.

Every year just before Advent, I purchase an amaryllis bulb. Here's a photo of the one I just brought home (photo). An amaryllis bulb stores the energy and nutrients from which emerges a tall, thick flower stalk (often 1-2 feet high) that produces enormous trumpet-shaped blooms, and the flowers come in vivid colors—red, white, pink, salmon, and even striped varieties.

These gorgeous flowers burst forth during the dark days of December when few other flowers bloom. These flowers grow in the darkest part of the year.

The amaryllis bulb has a fascinating relationship with darkness. When you first plant an amaryllis bulb, some of the initial root development and the very early stages of the flower stalk emerging happen in darkness or low light, drawing on the nutrients stored within the bulb itself. The amaryllis growth is unseen and yet certain. A lot more is going on than what we can see.

Growth and beauty emerge *because* of the darkness.

And it makes me wonder: if the amaryllis does some of its best growing in the dark, what else can grow in the dark?

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor explores "the dark" as a multifaceted concept that goes beyond simply the absence of light. Dark might be a word to describe a time that is

Mysterious.

Uncertain.

God feeling absent.

Marked by Loss.

Or Grief

Or Fear.

Or Failure.

Even Crisis.

And when we are in dark times, we long for hope, don't we?

We read in Jeremiah 29:11.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

While this is certainly a hopeful verse, the reality is that the prophet Jeremiah wrote these words during a time of exile – 70 years of exile, actually. 70 years of darkness. And yet he writes with a hope that God's plans were already at work.

Now friends, I do not in any way want to minimize the darkness – especially if that is where you find yourself today – rather – I want to acknowledge the darkness, how very real it is and completely validate how difficult it may be.

The word used for "hope" in this passage in Jeremiah is Tikvah, a Hebrew word which carries the meaning of expectation, hope, something to look forward to. It's derived from a root word that means "to wait" or "to expect," conveying the idea of confident expectation rather than mere wishful thinking.

It's worth saying that it's when there is darkness that hope is needed.

And there is always darkness somewhere, isn't there? Throughout history, hope was so important in times of oppression, injustice, and darkness— I think of the abolition of slavery, the end of apartheid, women fighting for the right to vote, the fall of the Berlin Wall, just to name a few – hope was needed in the darkest of times and we see this time and time again.

Hope has a way of trusting that the darkness is part of the story *and* not the whole story – that there's more going on than we can see and more yet to come in our lives, in our future. This was true for Jeremiah and for the people of Israel. Hope trusts that transformation is happening beneath the surface.

It's in the darkness that hope grows.

In Romans 15:13 we read this,

The Greek word for "hope" in this verse is *elpis*.

The word *elpis* appears both at the beginning and at the end of this verse. In Greek, *elpis* means hope, expectation, or confidence, particularly in the sense of a confident expectation of good. It conveys not just a wish, but a forward-looking trust and assurance, especially in the context of faith in God's promises.

All throughout scripture we see examples of God's faithful promises in the darkest of times— Abraham and Sarah held on to the promise for a son even when circumstances seemed impossible, after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites' deliverance through Moses became the defining story of hope for God's people - showing that God hears the cries of the oppressed, In the book of Ruth, we read about a widowed Moabite woman who seemed to have no future and found hope, provision, and ultimately became part of the lineage of King David and Jesus Christ, and then of course the birth of Christ, which we will celebrate in a few weeks, is the ultimate story of hope, the story of good news for all people , as God became flesh in the most unlikely way and brought hope to those living in spiritual darkness – Emmanuel, God with us. The God of hope came to be with us. God is our source of hope in the darkness.

In the book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, the central theme is that at times we've developed an unhealthy "solar spirituality" that only values brightness, clarity, and certainty, while treating darkness as something to be feared or eliminated. The alternative, the author proposes is a "lunar spirituality" that recognizes darkness as a necessary, even sacred, part of existence where we can learn things unavailable to us in the light.

And it makes me wonder – what is growing in the darkness of our lives that we cannot yet see?

If the God of hope is with us, If the God of hope promises us a future, how can we allow hope to grow in and among us? And so, I wondered if we could explore together that very question – how can we let hope grow in the darkness?

One of the ways that we can let hope grow in the darkness is to pause, notice, and celebrate the stories of hope all around us. I think about.

- o the parent breaking generational cycles of abuse, creating safety for their kids and the generations to come
- o choosing connection when isolation feels easier
- o the friend who initiates the honest and loving conversation
- o I think of the nurses and medical staff who treat patients with dignity, creating ease in difficult moments

These kinds of stories remind me that miracles are around us and that hope is real.

And, we can look for “glimmers” of hope in our *own* story.

Glimmers were first coined by therapist Deb Dana. And in their simplest terms they are the opposite of triggers. And a trigger is when you have an experience that moves you into a place of Fight, Flight, or Freeze.

And while triggers are very real, so are glimmers.

Noticing and writing down glimmers has become a daily spiritual practice for me – a way of practicing hope – even when hope feels slightly out of reach - reminding me of what is true – glimmers to support practicing hope in the darkest of days, as a form of holy rebellion against/while in the darkness.

Glimmers are the tiny moments of awe that we may feel when we see or experience something soothing, such as catching a beautiful sunset, the first slow sip of coffee in the morning when your eyes are barely open, a beautiful dancing sunbeam across your desk, a smile from a stranger, your favourite song heard unexpectedly on the radio.

The little tiny moments send cues of safety to your body.

And these cues of safety enable our body to respond with positive energy. They boost our mental health. They bring feelings of ease and contentment. They enable us to feel hope when we've felt lost. They show us that movement forward is possible.

And the incredible concept of glimmers, apart from their momentary beauty, is that they have the ability to strengthen our nervous system and increase our capacity in life. They show us that we can gain access to feeling safer within our nervous system.

And the more we seek them, the more we notice them

Glimmers are essentially training our eyes to see what's already there. Once you train your brain to be on the lookout for glimmers, you begin to see them everywhere.

And so, I want to invite you to take a moment ...

Think how your body responds when you see something awe-inspiring such as the sky painted in colours that resemble cotton candy. Or a rainbow that comes after the rain and stops you in your tracks. For me, I pause and breathe a little deeper, That's a glimmer.

Or that feeling when you wake in the morning (without your alarm clock) and you realise it's your day off and you don't have to rush. That's a glimmer.

Or you see your dog do something really cute, like smile in their sleep or wait eagerly for you at the door when you arrive. For the dog people in the room, these are definitely glimmers!

Or that feeling of taking your shoes off after a long day. A glimmer.

Or that feeling of slipping into a freshly made bed. A glimmer.

Or a check-in text from a friend. Always a beautiful glimmer.

Fresh flowers in the house. A glimmer

And if you struggle to connect with these or feel the glimmer, maybe take a moment to close your eyes and visualise a happy memory. Stay here for a while and notice what your body does. Maybe it feels a little calmer? Maybe you feel your jaw unclench and your shoulders drop? Maybe your breathing becomes a little deeper? All those beautiful cues of safety flooding your nervous system.

Glimmers have a way of bringing us out of a stress response, a dark moment, and back to safety, back to hope.

Glimmers are moments that literally nourish the soul. Reminding you that you have the capacity to feel hope, even if in a tiny dose for now.

Perhaps in this season of advent, you may want to start collecting glimmers daily. No glimmer is too small. Glimmers - where your world can feel just a little warmer, safer and gentler. And where you can bring that sense of safety and warmth and gentleness with you into each moment, each relationship, each experience.

Another way that we can let hope grow in the darkness is to lean on the promises of God. Perhaps this advent you take time to search and write out the promises of God that you discover in scripture. Promises that ground us in who God is. Promises such as: we are never alone, nothing can separate us from the love of God, we are forgiven, death is defeated, God is making all things new - Just to name a few.

How might the God of hope want to fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him this advent season, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit?

As we think back to the amaryllis, there is always more going on than what we can see with our eyes. Here is a photo of my amaryllis from last year as it bloomed one dark morning in my kitchen (photo). Some growth even happens *because* of the darkness. Or as Mary Oliver in her well-known poem, the Uses of Sorrow writes

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

The prophet Jeremiah, 600 years before the birth of Christ, taught us – hope grows IN the darkness. And hope is absolutely needed when darkness is real. We trust that darkness is not the whole story and that there is always more going on than what we can see with our human eyes. Like the amaryllis, hope requires us to trust the transformation and growth that is not yet visible. Romans 15:13 teaches us that God is the source of our hope in the darkness. The God of hope is with us. Emmanuel – God with us.

And how do we grow and cultivate hope in the darkness. Through celebrating stories, Noticing glimmers. Leaning on promises. Embodying hope to ourselves, to others.

You and I may be someone's miracle, someone's reason to believe hope is real. Not that we can necessarily fix circumstances for another, and yet can we provide the gift of presence with another in their darkness which is its own form of hope.

What if this Advent we opened our hearts and lives up to the goodness of God? What if we lived with hope because of the promises of God – not because life is perfect or certain...that will never be the case, hope because we are not alone – God is with us we are trusting the growth and transformation that is happening even while it feels dark. It's in the darkness that hope grows.

Mary consoles Eve/ closing practice.

Image on screen (right until the end when I say 'amen') and soft music playing (band)

As we close our time today, and the band comes to the stage, I want to invite you to take a moment and gaze at an art piece with me. It's a piece of art created by one of the sisters at Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey. Some of you may have seen this before and it's one that I personally come back to again and again during advent – and each time something different stands out to me.

First notice the shame on Eve's face and the serpent coiled around her ankles. Can you sense the hopelessness in Eve?

Notice the look in Mary's eyes as Eve places her hand on Mary's belly as she gently introduces Eve to the growing baby. What do you notice about the look in Mary's eyes?

Notice how Eve still clutches the apple.

Notice Mary's heel crushing the serpent's head.

Where do you find yourself in this image this advent?

What feels hopeless? Where do you sense hope?

Take a moment to reflect and listen.

Silence and soft music.

For even the great fall of humankind can be healed and can find hope in Christ.

He has come to make his blessings known as far as the curse is found.

While much is dark and while much is uncertain, hope *is* growing. Hope is growing in the darkness of Mary's womb.

Hope us coming in the form of a baby.

Emmanuel. God with us.

This is the advent story and it is such good news.

Amen.