

When I was part of the meetings and conversations about what our advent series was going to look like this year and it eventually came to the decision that I would pray about, write and deliver one of these 4 advent talks, I can for sure tell you that I was not exactly the most thrilled, not because I don't love sharing with our community, but I think I felt hesitant because the 4 themes of advent are such sacred words and characteristics of God that feel so hard to encapsulate and experience in my day to day life.

And of course, by somewhat random selection and prayerful consideration, I was given the morning on peace. Which made these feelings of uncertainty even more uncertain honestly.

If you know me, I don't think you would use the word peaceful to describe me. Loving, joyful, hopeful sure – in different spaces and spheres of my life I feel like ya, those somewhat track... peaceful... not so much.

Once I knew this was my destiny, I began to consider what my actual gut reaction to the idea of peace is, I started to consider what it actually means to be peaceful, or what I believe it means to be peaceful.

What first came to mind for me was the ability to just be, to do nothing, or to just sit.

To sit in whatever space, emotion, circumstance and find calm. To be reflective, to not be disturbed or interrupted. All things, that are for sure outside of my nature.

With this in mind I began looking into what the bible says about peace I realized that peace comes from and is found within our circumstances or moments of disruption – not separate from them, peace can even be found or can grow in the darkness.

As a moment of recognition, of contemplation, realization or honestly just ownership of whatever circumstances or emotions we find ourselves in.

So, I started to think about my life, when was a dark moment where I felt peace? Instead of coming up with a list of places where I felt peace, I actually made a list of where I ran away from it – it felt a lot easier.

The most vivid moment that came to mind was in the 24 hours after my dad had passed away, Thanksgiving of 2021. I had a trip booked to Nova Scotia to visit a friend just 4 or 5 days later, so I called my friend to let her know the news that my dad had died very unexpectedly.

We had some moments of beautiful compassionate heart to heart over the phone and then she said that I should cancel my ticket and take some time at home.

To which from across the room, my mom responded with – “No, she’s going, what is she going to do here. Sit around and be sad?”

No shade to my mom what so ever, because honestly, she took the words right out of my mouth. But I wonder if this might be a sentence that you have said to yourself in a similar situation?

In the pain of circumstance, the failure, the grief. You say to yourself “No, I am not going to let myself feel the darkness or sit in the darkness, I am going to go find something happy to think about. I am going to trick myself into pretending that the dark does not exist.” We have all been there I am sure.

In the book that Carrie Jones, referenced last weeks, Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbra Brown Taylor she says that we are often raised to stay in the light and avoid the dark at all costs.

Which is exactly what happened in my life. I wanted to run from the darkness because my mom encouraged me to run from the darkness because her mom only ever ran from the darkness and going generations back all the way to bible times, people seem to always be running away from the darkness.

Miriam Greenspan is quoted in the Taylors book saying

“Some of us have even gotten the message that if we cannot avoid [the darkness] on the churches schedule we may not have enough faith in God. If we had enough, we would be able [to] banish the dark angels from our beds, replacing them with the light angels of belief, trust and praise.” Miriam Greenspan calls this spiritual bypassing – using religion to dodge the dark emotions instead of letting it lead us to embrace those dark angels as the best, most demanding spiritual teacher we may ever know.”

Here Taylor reminds us that the darkness is actually a spiritual teacher. We are awakened in the darkness and growth happens in the darkness.

Think about a tiny seed that germinates underground, or a baby in the womb, the pictures on the screen are from a book by a loved Canadian author named Laura Alary who does a lot of work in the kid’s ministry world and explores the liturgical calendar. She wrote this book called “Who needs the dark” as an advent resource and the images in this book remind me of the dark places in nature where God brings new life through growth.

She hopes to help people recognize that the dark is necessary for growth and newness, healing and dreaming.

I am sure that we have all heard the words “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle”. And I don’t know who might need to hear it today, but that’s just not the case. The death of my dad was for sure more than I could handle. The stress of the advent series and getting everything ready, on a work front in order, to get to this moment was for sure more than I felt I could handle.

Maybe for you the daily rhythm of being a parent feels like more than you can handle, maybe you’re a caregiver of a loved one, or your work life is stressful, you have deadlines that are coming way faster than you could ever imagine. Maybe your finances are more than you can handle, grief, sorrow, pain, hurt, longing, loneliness all more than you can handle. Maybe one of these words resonates with you and you can remember a time when or you are currently in a place, where you feel like you are in over your head and you just can’t handle it.

But then you hear those words, “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle,” this makes it feel like the verdict is out – I am the problem.

I need to search for God in the darkness, I am not searching hard enough, I am not praying enough, reading the bible enough - because God is in the darkness it’s just my fault that I can’t find him, which is just not the case.

As a sidenote, the verse that is used in reference to this kind of thinking actually is talking about temptation – not situations of grief and fear or darkness.

1 Corinthians 10:13 - God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.

For many of us, we can feel like we just aren't looking for peace hard enough. But really, our culture has taught us over and over again to avoid finding peace, not because we don't desire peace but because we don't desire sitting in the darkness where peace is inevitable to grow.

The Person of Jesus, reveals that God isn't actually found in the darkness, but he breaks into the darkness and his peaceful presence grows there. Peace grows in the darkness when we sit long enough to notice it.

I wonder how many of you are sitting here or even when you saw the title of our series this advent season thought to yourself. Dang man, I wanted a fun light hearted Christmas series to help contrast the messiness and intellectually heavy Revelation study we have been in for the past number of months. Or maybe you're in a circumstance where you just want to escape during this hour at church.

Well, sister me too! But as I was writing this, I took a second, and realized that that was me again trying to avoid the darkness and really that was way more the heart posture I had when I felt so unqualified to speak about peace, I avoid peace because time and time again I avoid the darkness.

When we look to the Christmas story, we see a lot happening in the physical and emotional darkness of the world.

There is reference of night, physical darkness, fear, doubt, uncertainty, anxiety, worry and sorrow all throughout it. And in all of these instances the coming of Jesus, the light, is key.

You can find the Christmas story in Luke where in Chapter 1 it begins with the story of Elizabeth and Zachariah. They are a couple, older in age, but have not been able to conceive a child. An angel named Gabriel appears to Zachariah in his sorrow (in his own emotional darkness) and tells him that Elizabeth will bear a son and they will call him John. Gabriel then a few verses later appears to Mary with a similar story – Gabriel tells her that she would bear a son and in this case, he would be the Messiah.

By the end of Chapter 1, John is born and it says that Zechariah being filled with the Holy Spirit prophesies that his son John will make a way for the Messiah.

“And you, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God’s merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:76-79

I want you to notice something here. It says “the dawn from on high will **visit us** to shine on those who live in darkness”.

Jesus isn’t in the darkness, he doesn’t come from the darkness, he comes INTO the darkness, he visits us in the darkness. He is from outside of the darkness, He is nothing but light. And he will VISIT us and guide our feet INTO the way of peace.

But first he arrives in the darkness.

Peace is grown in the darkness not because we can search for God within it by looking really hard and sitting in the pain and sorrow so much that we eventually just run into God, like how we unexpectedly run into someone we know at the grocery store, totally unknowingly and without effort.

But God actually visits us, we don't have to do anything to find Him except be present and aware, he searches for us through the aisles of our darkest grocery stores.

In Christmas story, peace arrived in the darkness. He was born in the darkness of night, to a mother and father who were in their own emotional darkness of fear and worry and like Zachariah prophesied, Jesus birth brought light to guide our feet into peace.

If I could go back to that phone call with my friend in Nova Scotia, would I change my mind, and stay home in order to sit in my grief and wait for peace to come? If I am honest, probably not, but I say that not because I don't want to sit in the dark, but because I know that darkness is not bad and it is not something to run away from.

A really influential person in my faith once told me that emotions are not inherently negative or positive, the world tells us these things. Happiness, excitement – positive, sorrow or pain – negative, these emotions are all actually just telling us something. They don't fit into a Venn Diagram on opposite sides positive and negative, they actually live in the middle because they are telling us where we need to lean on God to find peace.

The same thing happened to the shepherds in the Christmas story when they were about to learn of the birth of Jesus. In Luke chapter 2:8 it says

“In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.”

Although this is physical darkness, it implies fear, there was something that the shepherds were afraid would hurt their sheep, they were on high alert – kind of feels like anxiety to me. They had probably lost sheep in the past when they were not diligent enough to stay awake all night, that sounds like grief and pain as well.

So, the shepherds are experiencing their own physical and emotional darkness, but then what happens?

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born to you, who is the Messiah, the baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger. Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest heaven and PEACE on earth to people he favors!”

Again, here in the darkness, light is a visitor, it doesn’t come from within the darkness because the shepherds were searching so diligently for it, but it visits them in the form of an angel with the good news that Jesus was born – peace on earth was here!

Barbra Brown Taylor, ends off her book with a beautiful image that I want to share with you, where she visits Our Lady of the Underground which is a statute in the lower level of the Notre Dame in France.

Our Lady of the Underground is a statue of Mary etched in dark wood, with a baby – Jesus - on her lap. Taylor recounts her experience of viewing the statue for the first time. She recounts that the statue is carved out of dark wood and she acknowledges that there are many theories as to why the artist choose dark wood, but she wonders if the choice isn't actually portraying something about Mary, but is portraying something about the person who is looking at her.

Taylor then writes this poetic metaphorical conversation that she has with Mary.

“Our Lady of the Underground never asks me to choose between day and night. If I want to flourish, I need the ever-changing light of darkness as much as I need the full light of day. Give your heart to them both, she says.

When I complain that I cannot see as well at night as I can during the day, she tells me this is a good thing. Maybe it will slow you down.

When I tell her that I cannot get as much done at night because darkness makes me sleepy, she says yes, that is the plan. Maybe you will get some rest.

When I point out that slowing down just makes me think about things I would rather not think about, she laughs. Do you think that not thinking about them will make them go away?”

I wonder if this metaphorical conversation might ring true to us.? Although I wouldn't change that I went to visit a friend quickly after my dad passed, I do wish that while sitting on that plane, or in my bedroom, or with my friend, or therapist or in a journal or on a walk I allowed the darkness to slow me down, give me rest and give me time to think - not to search deeper for God into the darkness, but to prepare my heart for the gift of peace that would enter the darkness and visit me.

I know that Jesus calls me to be expectant and open to peace, not because of my own doing but because of his majesty and awe. I wonder if during this Christmas season when a physical or emotional experience of darkness occurs for you, that you might be able to remember Zachariah's prophecy – that Jesus visits us in the dark to guide our feet into peace.

That when we are quick to avoid avoid avoid and it feels like sirens are blaring to run the other way, maybe that we would sit and notice the darkness and be reminded that darkness isn't negative or positive – it reminds us of Jesus's already and not yet peace, and that that peace will visit us.

Let's pray

God, I thank you that you sent your son to be born at Christmas, during the darkest days of the year we are reminded that your son is the light. The light that visits us not because we worked hard enough to find you in the darkness but because we were expectant. Thank you that you are peace on earth. Help us to be reminded of your already and not yet peace so that when you return and bring full, never-ending peace we would know that that was always the plan. In Jesus name, Amen.