

Why Are Christians Growing More Fascinated With Darkness?

“Christianity has never had anything nice to say about the dark.”

The opening line in TIME magazine’s April 2014 opinion article by former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor is certainly true of the faith historically. TIME also placed Taylor’s face on it’s cover and printed a lengthy profile of the journey that inspired her book, “Learning to Walk in the Dark,” which subsequently became a New York Times bestseller. Her message of embracing, and even redeeming, the darkness resonated with many.

Taylor isn’t the only one exploring the darkness in recent years, though many do not see it as she does.

John Piper, for example, penned a book titled, “When the Darkness Will Not Lift,” in 2006 that casts darkness in a different light. And now, popular Christian teacher and author Nancy Ortberg, a former teacher at Willowcreek Community Church and a respected Christian voice on leadership and spirituality, has joined the conversation. Her new book is titled “Seeing in the Dark: Finding God’s Light in the Most Unexpected Places.”

Ortberg talks with Religion News Service’s Jonathan Merritt about why she, like so many others, is fascinated with darkness and what she wants to tell Christians who seem stuck in a shady space.

Q: Let’s start by understanding the key

term here. How do you define darkness?

A: Well, a technical definition might be something like an absence of visible light. In our lives, it is our experiences of the absence of hope, connection, meaning and guidance. It is the feeling of being adrift and unmoored, unable to be tethered to God. It is a hollow and alone feeling, not knowing what to do or where to step next. Times when the pain or grief swallows you.

Q: The Scriptures talk about darkness as a negative thing to be avoided, no? Should the goal be to get out of the darkness rather than to poke around in it?

A: Sometimes. There can be a component to it of evil certainly, and those are the times in the Bible that talk about avoiding the darkness. There is however, another kind of darkness ... a darkness that cannot, and often should not, be avoided. Think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane or on the cross. Two of the most critical times in his life, and there he was, in the darkness, doing what most of us do, questioning and pleading. Many of the desperate people who came to Jesus were in that same place, and he meets them there.

Should we poke around? No. But stay and dig deep and wait? Yep. Most of us can look in the rear view mirror of these seasons of darkness and observe the wondrous unfolding of God in our lives. That can help, taking that perspective on the front end of difficult times. But really there is no substitute for facing it and going through it. Not avoiding, not medicating (and there are so many ways to do that apart from substance abuse), but being in it, feeling it, thinking it, and waiting. Waiting for the wrestling to stop. And you

don't stop the wrestling so that it will stop, you go through the wrestling until it is finished. Waiting for the waves of pain to subside enough to be still. And wait. For God.

Q: What do the Psalms teach us about seeing in the dark?

A: Really remarkable stuff actually. Interestingly the Hebrew word for "psalm" means praise. And yet there are more psalms of lament than there are psalms of praise. I think there is a message in that. Perhaps the way to authentic praise is through lament. The honesty, conflict and struggle, is often exactly what takes you on the path to find God in the midst of the darkness.

There are some pretty brutal passage in Psalms. One asks God to break the teeth out of enemies mouths'. Another tells God that they wish their enemies would melt like snails on a hot day. Another requests that God will allow the unborn child of their enemy to be stillborn. Hardly the psalms we choose for responsive readings in church on Sunday. Yet, it is the word of God.

There is a necessary struggle in the darkness. And I think, too many Christians rush to the chirpy, happy chatter they think God requires of them, without understanding the path to get there. Our spiritual formation does not often adequately address and help us navigate well these dark times and places.

Q: The Bible says God is a God of light and "in Him there is no darkness." How do you understand that verse after studying this topic?

A: Well that's the hope, isn't it? The metaphor of God as light just permeates Scripture. Allowing your mind to wander

with “what might that mean” is quite a lovely practice. What does light do? What is the nature of light? If there is no darkness in God, then two things are true: First, no matter how deeply or often we test that, it will remain true. So we don’t have to be afraid of our questions, fears, anger, despair. Second, my journey must be to that God of light every time.

Q: How do you help someone who is experiencing a dark season?

A: I love the passage in 2 Corinthians 1 where Paul says we comfort others with the same comfort that we have been given by God. In a sense, there is an almost magnetic pull to come alongside of one who is struggling with that kind of help. But each of us can only offer so much help to one in a dark season. Each of us will have to be alone with God in that darkness. That is not to underestimate the help; but it releases us from the burden of feeling like there must be an endless source of support from us to the other.

I would start by being present and listening. Just show up. Ask a question or two – or don’t. Don’t talk very much, but listen instead. Look in to their eyes. Respond. If you are able to authentically and occasionally say “me too” or “of course,” that might be helpful.

Also, do something practical without being asked. Go to the grocery store, run an errand, send a card, clean the house, take their kids to the park, send flowers, and invite others to keep the helping going over time.

You should also pray. With them. Away from them. Short prayers, pleading prayers, non-anxious prayers. And ask others to pray also.

And finally, follow up. Listen when they talk and pay attention to something that might get said that would give you

a clue as to what might be a helpful next thing for you to do. At the same time, know that you cannot be the one to do all these things for everyone you know who is going through a difficult time.

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