

“IN THE BEGINNING”
John 1:10-18
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A few weeks ago, I almost hit a pedestrian with my car. It was drizzling—welcome to Oregon—at about 4:30 in the afternoon, that twilight moment where it’s not really light out, but not dark either, and everything around takes on shades of deep gray. I simply didn’t see this person who was walking on the side of Brooklane, wanting to stay out of the mud on the shoulder, until it was almost too late. It was an unnerving experience even though no harm was done; and I found myself recounting the story to a friend of mine, a police officer up in Seattle, the week after it happened. I was surprised when he told me that that limited time of day, called romantically by poets the “gloaming”—the time between darkness and light—is the most dangerous time of the day for accidents, worse than full darkness, because when all color bleaches to shades of gray, it takes longer for our brains to sort out “this” from “that,” street from sidewalk, trees, bushes, turn-offs, and a man in a neutral-colored coat walking by the side of the road.

From the beginning of the gospel of John: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” I found myself this week thinking a lot about light and darkness. We like to think of them as opposites: dark, light; black, white; night, day; here and there; separate, even when we know, in fact, that darkness and light, like night and day, exist on a continuum, where the one is always shading towards the other. No matter that we know that: still we want to draw clean lines between the darkness and the light, the good and the bad, who and what are on the side of God, and who and what are not.

We are, by our nature, creatures who want clarity, light. We want to know what to think about the world around us, how to judge both people and events. Start with events. When something happens to us, what’s our first question? We ask ourselves, “Is this a good thing or a bad thing?” Any change of job, or change in relationship, change in financial status, any kind of significant change: we want to place it tidily in either the credit or debit column of our lives. These are the good things that have happened; these are the bad. Simple. Straightforward. But it’s not that easy—even the news about the tsunami in southern Asia; what a horrifying event that is, death and devastation on a scale I can’t even imagine. You can’t consider that disaster anything less than terrible, and yet even in the midst of that great darkness, there are reported acts of great courage, compassion, love, heroism. There is the outpouring of money and volunteers throughout the world community. Let me be clear here. I’m not saying that these responses make the tsunami a good thing, but rather that even in that deep darkness, there are pinpoints of light, moments of grace. The darkness is not absolute.

And in everyday life, the mix of good and bad is even more confusing. The new job that pays more money and is more fulfilling also takes up more time, leaves us less energy for

family, for outside interests, just “to be.” The trauma of a divorce or otherwise ruptured relationship can be the occasion of personal growth, change, the possibility of better relationship. So is it good, or is it bad? Why does it have to be one or the other? I remember several years ago, soon after I was divorced, I was at a dinner party. The man sitting next to me was talking about his divorce, and how after his marriage broke down, he took the time to think about the mistakes he had made, how he was careful now to spend more time with his children; he was in a new relationship and determined not to repeat past errors. I listened to him talk, and out of my mouth, without my thinking about it, came the words, “So the divorce was a good thing?” There I was, trying to tidy life up. He looked at me, both patience and irritation in his eyes, and replied evenly, “It’s hard to call the most devastating event of my life a good thing, but I think I’m a better person because of it.” And I was left confused at the time. He wasn’t going to tell me whether to put this event in the bad or good column.

And then there’s people. We want them to be good or bad also. How many political careers have been abruptly terminated because the public finds out that in an otherwise ordinary life there has been one scandal, one misstep—and in an instant every good and decent thing a person has done fades to unimportance? How many times have we known a friend who has, in one circumstance, behaved badly, and that’s the end of friendship. When I lived in Duluth, a man in the community was accused of embezzling from his company. A congregation member, executive director for a group of half-way houses for the developmentally disabled, told me he was having dinner with the man that week. I was surprised. He told me the man had been a faithful board member of his organization for many years and needed a friend. He didn’t minimize what the man had done, but reminded me that that one action was not all there was to this individual.

No one is all good or all bad. No one of us. Not even the great and faithful heroes of the Bible. Look at King David, God’s chosen, who had Uriah the Hittite killed because David wanted Bathsheeba, Uriah’s wife. Look at Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. For each of these great patriarchs, there is included in the scripture at least one story of lying, cheating, stealing, cowardice. Not insignificant sins, not easily explained away. Important information about each of the patriarchs, but not the only important information. The Bible goes to great lengths to let us know that even the most faithful servants of God are flawed, make mistakes, not just peccadillos, but significant errors of judgment or character. They are a mix of darkness and light. They are like us.

Why is that so difficult for us to accept, both about others and about ourselves? Why do we want to reduce life to a series of litmus tests of bad and good? Why must the glass of life be either half-full or half-empty instead of both at once, complicated, variously textured, changing in appearance as the light moves from day to night and back again. I don’t have a simple answer for those questions. Sometimes I think we don’t want to see the shadings of darkness and light in the world because we believe that oversimplifying will make our lives easier. Sometimes I think we deny the complexity of life and other people because we are in denial about the complexity of our selves. We want to be good.

We are afraid that if we are not all good, then we will not be loved, will not be acceptable. And so we turn our fears outward, and model the very behavior we fear from others.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. God does not promise us a self or a world where light and dark are far apart and separate from each other. God does not promise us a self or a world where all is light, and where, if we are faithful, we will not know the darkness. God does not promise even to spare us from the dangers of the twilight, where all is shades of gray, and we must struggle to perceive this thing and that and where they stand in relation to each other. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. What God does promise is that the darkness within ourselves, the darkness of the world, is never absolute. Never. Within that darkness, there may be just the light of one flickering candle, but the light is there; the light is the light of God, and the darkness cannot and will not extinguish God's light. So for us, our task in living is neither to deny the darkness nor to deny the light that dwells always in the darkness. Depending on where we are in our lives, one or the other may be the harder task; yet in that discernment, in that willingness to live life and faith complicatedly, is our fidelity to God's Word. Thanks be to God. Amen.