

Darkness is the Womb of God.  
January 14, 2024 – Rev. Jenn Hind

John 3:1-17  
New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition  
Nicodemus Visits Jesus

**3** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

<sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (God’s Womb)

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You<sup>[a]</sup> must be born from above.’

<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

The Generative Darkness (God’s Womb)

Seeds rest in the soil.

Frogs burrow into deep mud and accept the nearness of death.

Bears sleep under drifts of snow.

Squirrels nestle in the hollow of a tree and rely on the stores of autumn.

Sap of oak and maple thicken and slow.

Prairie grass whispers a farewell on a cold wind and withdraw to root and ground.

We light a lamp.

We watch for dawn, trusting it will come once more.

The season of wintering brings death for so much that flourished in springtime, the Season of wintering brings dormancy for lives in need of rest, the season of wintering brings a lingering darkness.

We can see by way of what the natural world reveals, darkness holds its own luminous vitality; it can be a generative place of repose, healing, growth, and transformation.

Darkness is also a place of mystery where we cannot rely on our senses in the same way we are accustomed to in the light, and where we must trust another way of perceiving, we must seek another way of knowing.

By traveling darkened paths — pathways shadowed by suffering, loss, grief, doubt, confusion, or uncertainty — we come to perceive an enduring light to which we formerly had been blind.

We are like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night seeking confirmation of his expectations, and who suddenly found himself blinded by a moment of not-knowing, confronted by an unlearning and re-birthing by the light of Christ's love.

Nicodemus needed this dark night of the soul, much like a growing embryo requires the darkened wait within the womb before birth.

In the upheaval of a waning pandemic, war, economic instability and the persistent struggles for racial justice, the unmooring of social patterns and structures — we traverse a disorienting nighttime of pain and grief.

Sometimes, in order to heal, transform and encounter some new illumination, we must consent to go by the way of what is dark and pregnant with not-knowing.

After struggling with how to make sense of all of this, I had a thought that did make sense to me.

There are times where we need to be at a loss, times where we need to befriend our confusion. There are times when being in the dark is the only way to see the light.

In my work at Stedman Community Hospice, I am often in the presence of grief, bereavement, death and dying, confusion, and fear. When I am walking with people we are often walking in the darkness of pain of loss. I often find myself standing in space between the pieces of one's broken heart.

One of the reasons I think Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah song, his poem are so widely renowned, recounted and recorded is because in its genius it explores and conveys the complexities of Love and Loss not only as fundamental components of each other, but of the human experience itself.

At its core there is deep loss, there is deep confusion in the notion of a broken hallelujah. The poem takes us by way of darkness into a glimmer of light around the sharp edges of love and loss as the words culminate into an acceptance of the pain, but only, only for the sake of Love.

For what is love but, in the end, a broken hallelujah, because we dared to love, we dared to lose.

As the song confirms: "There is a blaze of light in every word", despite the pain I shall still "stand before the Lord of Song with nothing on my tongue but hallelujah", which is to say for the joy of love that I have known, I would do it all again and again.

"I see your flag on the marble arch"; I see the act of surrender to life and loss, I see the hole within your soul that love has caused, I see the broken edges of your heart.

I see the pain you carry, but I also see also the shimmer of light your bravery in wintering bestows, for to love and to be loved is nothing short of a courageous act.

As the "baffled king composes Hallelujah" our baffled hearts compose a new song from the darkness of our tempest-tossed days so that we may one day rise and answer the call to love once again.

We take with us the light that shines through our broken things, and we let it guide our path and encourage us to be brave once again, precisely for the sake of love.

Carrying with us always the cost of love, we reinvest and double down because love itself is worth the pain time and time again.

All this to say, I realized that Jesus does not want to give Nicodemus what he wants. Jesus wants to give him what he needs.

Jesus knew that Nicodemus needed, for once in his life, he needed to not to have it all figured out, that he would only make progress as he went through the disorientation and painful confusion, to go through the darkness of not understanding of not knowing.

If Nicodemus was to stand in the light of the truth and the grace that Jesus was offering, Nicodemus was going to have to let go of many of the assumptions and dogmas that he was so firmly holding onto for dear life.

He needed to gather his courage and be willing to risk his status and his power so that he might inherit a more transformative, life-enhancing gift we call Love.

This is not the first time we have seen Jesus do this. Jesus often gives us the opposite of what we think we need.

That rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking the way to eternal life comes to mind.

He wanted Jesus to affirm him for all the hard work he had done to be a good and holy person and give him the final assurance that he was on the path to heaven.

But Jesus confused him up by telling him to give up everything, give everything away and follow him. Jesus seems to do the same with us in our own time.

We'd like to find a way to justify nursing that grudge with someone, and Jesus tells we need to forgive.

You come to worship, wanting a little peace and comfort in our life, and what we receive is a command to go be in relationship and service to others.

Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand that He was not offering Nicodemus some nice new insight into his life, but fundamental transformation and a complete reorientation of his life. Nothing reorients our life quite the way grief does.

Nicodemus needed to start over and come into this world with a radically new way of seeing himself and this world.

He needed to press the factory reset button on himself and begin anew.

He had done the advanced training to living a holy life but needed now to go back to the beginning and remember the basics.

That is why Jesus uses such a surprising image. Jesus says we must be born again.

We must be reborn in a birth that comes from **the womb of God**.

What a perfect image Jesus offers us. Just for a moment, consider that image of birth.

A baby begins in a womb. A womb is a place of darkness. In the womb, we are attached to our mother, in whom we dwell, and from who, in that dark warm place, everything is provided.

In the womb there is no thinking, only feeling and receiving.

We are born by way of darkness into the light.

*Being born again, being born of God's womb is to be reborn by way of darkness.*

Like I tell my clients if you're using your head to think your way through your grief you're using the wrong tool, grief can only be felt and we cannot fix it, change it, go around it – we must go through it, just as we must come through the darkness of God's womb to be reborn into a place that recognizes the transformative power of God's Love.

This year as in previous years it feels as if the waxing night is accentuating the incessant changes and losses that we are experiencing right now with one another and bearing witness to along with the entire world.

Together we are living a moment that is shadowed by unrest and uncertainty.

We go this way not alone, but together. We go this way with "no other light, no other guide than the one burning in our hearts."

The light that is burning in our hearts is our collective light placed there by a power much greater than just ourselves as individuals

Let us become enlightened to the idea that we are universally connected to each other, by way of God's womb, let us harness this power and shine our unified light together and connect to that one principle that sustain Love above - all and that is that it is precisely in the dark where God's light shines most brightly.

So let us all leave here born again, born from above, born from water and spirit, born by way of the womb of God, because: It is the light that shines through our darkened and broken hearts that leads us once again down the path of courage and bestows upon us the acceptance, the willingness, and the beauty to rise and love again.

Amen

[The inexorable darkness: A reflection for this season of longest nights | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](http://mennoniteusa.org)

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Darkness and Light: An Epiphany Responsive Prayer

In the darkness before creation, you made all that lives and breathes.

In the darkness of Mary's womb you formed Jesus, bringer of light.

In the darkness of our world your spirit sustains us.

O God, you are with us in darkness and in light.

Under the cover of darkness,

Magi followed the star to the Christ-child.

We come from the East and we come from the West,

following you on our different roads,

following the same star to the same place.

O God, you are with us in darkness and in light.

In the stillness of the dark,  
we pray for all who need God's presence in a special way—  
people who cannot find work,  
who cannot pay their bills,  
who have no place to live,  
people who are discouraged and hopeless,  
people who have become cynical and bitter.

O God, you are with us in darkness and in light.

We live in this world in our bodies,  
we rejoice in life and breath,  
yet when sickness or pain cripples us,  
we lose our bearings, we feel lost and bewildered.  
We need your presence to keep us safe.  
Be with those who are sick, grieving, be with those who are in the dark

- Let us pause for a moment a hold a moment of silence and pray the prayers we find on our own hearts and minds in this moment.

O God, you are with us in darkness and in light.

Thank you for moments of inspiration,  
for moments of clear vision  
where we see who we are and who we are meant to be,  
where we see where we are, and where you want us to go.  
Give us courage to take the journey that you call us to,  
and give us strength on the road.

O God, you are with us in darkness and in light.

Your presence sustains us,  
help us to go from worship this morning,  
having seen your face,  
having done homage to your goodness,

Please join with me in praying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, for God is to all of us like Our Mother and Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, As it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, The power, and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen.