

**Both/And**  
**Genesis 1:1-5**  
**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**January 10, 2021**  
**Rev. Jill Cameron Michel**

My childhood home had a basement, as is common in Iowa. For most of my childhood it was what one might call “semi-finished.” There was a wall down the middle dividing out what we called the “back” of the basement, an area we used for storage and laundry, from the front which had indoor/outdoor carpet laid over the concrete floors and a large shelving unit to define a play area for my sister and I.

The basement was a place of great adventures. There we played dress up and Barbies, we danced and sang and created plays, we roller skated in our metal skates when it was too cold to do it outdoors. The basement was our stage, our hideaway, and our playground.

It was also a place where darkness could be thick and scary. After all, this was no walk out basement, not even a modern basement with large windows for egress. There were only a few small windows at the very top of the walls. And the lights downstairs were turned on and off by pull strings attached to the simple light fixtures. The only thing that made us brave enough to go downstairs at night was the light in the stairwell, controlled - of course - by a switch at the top.

So, on that rare occasion when the stairwell light was out (or when my sister turned it off while I was still downstairs), the basement - a place of joy when well lit - became a place of fear. The distance from the top step to the pull cord at the nearest light, while really only feet, felt like miles. The seconds it took to move from one place to the other seemed like hours and in the dark, I couldn't go fast enough.

How unfortunate, that from the earliest of our days we are taught, often unintentionally, to fear the dark. We are told to be in by dark. We are told that nothing good happens after midnight - a reference less about the exact hour and more about the darkness that is around us. And unfortunately, we have too often taken this fear of dark places and translated it to a fear of dark faces. Not only has our focus on light given a preference for daytime hours, but it has too often torn apart the fabric of our human family as we experience fear toward dark skin in a way we don't toward light. It also tears apart our faith as we speak in ways that indicate that God is more present in one place than another, in only the parts of our lives that are good and proper, in only the things we name good and not bad.

But, what is it about the dark that elicits such a response? After all, the dark is also a place of magic. It is where the stars shine bright. It is where we dream of all that happens in space beyond our existence. It is where our senses perk up and we hear sounds we would ignore during the day. It is where our eyes adjust and we realize that the darkness is rarely as thick as we imagine it to be. It is where we can rest from the

day's labor and be renewed for a fresh start. Darkness is where our life begins in the safety of our mother's womb.

And, while we often don't acknowledge it, in the story of our faith, darkness is a place of growth and a place from which we find our way. Just think of Jacob wrestling with the angel, or Jonah in the inevitable darkness of the belly of the big fish. Remember the dreams that come during sleep like the dream Joseph had that caused him to remain committed to Mary and Jesus. And even though we usually forget to acknowledge it, after all "resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air."<sup>1</sup>

And here, in the opening verses of Genesis...the opening verses of our Bible...we are reminded that God existed and created first in and from the darkness.

Genesis begins with those words that Beth read for us today, "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*"<sup>2</sup> We often read right past that...we move on to light and sky, earth and sea, growing things and living creatures, and finally humanity. We move on to the rhythm in the poetry of the first creation story. We move on to the refrain of goodness of creation.

But, it all began in darkness. It all began in a formless void. It all began in an idea. It all began in the heart of our creator whose existence was no less significant in the darkness of early creation than it is in the joy and celebration of our best days.

And our pausing with this reality, our coming to understand God's presence in all times and all places, in the midst of the joys and sorrows, in the face of each human being, in all places and parts of creation...this is more than a theoretical conversation - it impacts how we live and move and have our being, it impacts how we exist in this world and interact with others, it impacts how our faith carries us through or gets abandoned when life is difficult.

Friends, dark and light are not only both parts of our experience, but they are both necessary to our experience. Joy and sorrow are not enemies, but companions on our journey. Fear and love are both realities of being human. Good and bad things happen to us no matter how righteous we are and how hard we are trying. Contrary to what we so often tell ourselves and each other, life is not about passing from one binary reality to the other, but each of these experiences shapes us.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1-2, NRSV.

So, what happens when we understand God to be fully present and working in the midst of all of these realities? For one thing, it changes the way we experience our lives, the way we tell our stories, the way we treat one another.

See, too often we choose language and systems of belief that are either/or. And in some ways that is simpler. And yet, less faithful. After all, God is not on my side or your side. God does not exist only in our faithfulness and abandon us in our questions and doubts. God is not a God of good times and bright light, but God is a God who companions with us in the delightful and the terrible, in the easy and the challenging, in the moments when we are who we intend to be and those where we become our own worst nightmare. God, who created in the dark, who formed you in the “kind darkness of your mother’s womb”<sup>3</sup> - this God remains with us in all moments of our lives.

Siobhan Kelly, who some of you will remember from her time with us while doing an internship in music therapy, recently wrote this, “2020 highlighted the paradox of deep deep grief, sorrow, and suffering coexisting simultaneously with moments of laughter, peace, comfort, and even joy. Some things in life are deeply painful....Suffering happens, painful things occur, people experience losses of all kinds day in and day out. It is easy to feel that it will swallow you whole. [She goes on writing,] Honestly, I’ve had many days this year when I’ve felt completely swallowed by the enormity of the darkness and grief happening to me and to all of the world around me. I point out the inescapable suffering to emphasize the importance of finding ways to bear it.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps these opening verses of Genesis and the reminder they contain are a place to begin. Perhaps they help us remember that ours is not a God of either/or but rather of both/and. Perhaps they point us toward the words of psalmist who in Psalm 139 reminds us that there is nowhere we can go to flee from God’s presence. God is everywhere and in everything.

And while our inclination may be to escape as quickly as possible, perhaps, if we are willing to sit in the darkness - whether the literal dark of night time or that of the challenging moments in our lives - perhaps we will find gifts there that are just as treasured as the gifts of the light.

May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> John O’Donohue quoted at [Myth & Moor: On Winter Solstice \(terriwindling.com\)](https://terriwindling.com)

<sup>4</sup> <https://siobhankelleymtbc.medium.com/whats-kept-me-going-a44ccecf08>