

#AlternativeFaith: *When the Light Returns*

Matthew 5:13-16, 7:21-23

Sometime around the middle of March, in the northernmost town on earth with a year-round civilian population, the people of Longyearbyen, Norway get a glimpse of the sun for the first time in six months. Although there are settlements and outposts closer to the North Pole, those are mainly for scientific, meteorological, and military purposes, with residents who rarely last beyond a few months at a time.

These hardy souls of the Svalbard archipelago are the most light-deprived people on earth, generation after generation. For almost four months' time, they experience polar night, meaning there is nothing but pitch black darkness. For the entire year, their sunshine totals to a little over eleven hundred hours, which all come from mid-March to mid-October and is made even more bleak by the fact that in spring and early summer clouds arrive to provide their annual rainfall. So even when they can finally see the sun, it will often be hidden behind the gray overcast. One would assume in a place such as this that a sunny, clear day would be a rare and cherished, almost worshipful, experience. Appropriately, nearly every year, Easter is around the time when light returns to Longyearbyen.

Understandably, the lack of sunlight has a direct bearing on the psyches of those who live in such latitudes (Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Alaska, Greenland, Iceland), as well as for their counterparts who live closer to the South Pole (Patagonia and southern parts of Chile, New Zealand, Australia) for whom the same seasonal effect occurs at the opposite time of year. Seasonal Affective Disorder (with the rather appropriate acronym, S.A.D.) is a form of mental malaise that impacts up to

a quarter of the population in the regions, with periods of depression that can be accurately calculated by the calendar.

As far back as 300 years before the first Easter, Chinese philosophers of medical arts noted the seasonal impact of light upon the mental outlook, referencing the greater degree of yin or yang energy.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* explored the variety of theories and practices addressing Seasonal Affective Disorder as to cause and remedies. Some scientists believe that it has to do with light receptors in the eyes, where those who are less sensitive “struggle to synchronize their circadian clock with the outside world.”¹ Others believe it has to do with melatonin levels, where some people secrete higher levels in winter, much like hibernating mammals, resulting in a less active metabolism. The leading theory, “phase-shift hypothesis,” takes this a bit further, noting that shorter days throw melatonin levels off, which impact the thyroid, the hypothalamus, and even the neurotransmitter, serotonin, resulting in decreased energy, mood changes, and a lessening of appetite—all which factor into a seasonal affect.

The typical clinical remedy for those suffering Seasonal Affective Disorder are anti-depressants, hoping to regulate the serotonin levels in a sufferer’s metabolism to restore balance. But leave it to the Scandinavians to come up with more practical solutions. In the southern Norwegian city of Rjukan, local residents came up with the ingenious idea of placing large mirrors on the south-facing mountain cliffs surrounding the community, allowing the rising sun, otherwise hidden by mountains, to be reflected into the Town Square during the dark winter months. The net result was many more weeks of sunlight in the winter and fall (at least in the Town Square,

¹ Linda Geddes, “Will Norway Ever Beat the Winter Blues?”, *The Atlantic*, March 14, 2017.

where everyone goes to take in the sun and make merry!). As the author of *The Atlantic* article herself noted:

Stepping into the sunlight after hours in permanent shade, I become aware of just how much it shapes our perception of the world. Suddenly, things seem more three-dimensional; I feel transformed...When I leave the sunlight, Rjukan feels a flatter, grayer place. ²

The use of light as therapy has been employed all over northern regions with this seasonal affect. Light has been shown to alter people's physical states so that they are more energized and ambitious. In Sweden, during the winter, many schools incorporate bright light into classrooms to aid students who otherwise experience darkness all around them. Light therapy is incorporated into many government buildings and businesses as well, and above the Arctic Circle, flood lights brighten parks and walkways 24-hours a day to allow a sense of daylight in the dark. Light is beneficial to the bodies and spirits of those who suffer long periods of darkness.

Now you and I may not experience such a deprivation of natural sunlight in a season of darkness as do our friends to the north or their polar opposites to the south, but how they respond to their annual reality may be instructive for when we are going through dark and difficult periods in our own right.

What I mean is, what do we do when the days grow dark (seasonally or spiritually) and the landscapes of our lives no longer seem bright and filled with the energy, verve, and vitality we've known before or grown used to? What happens when the things that motivate us to being productive and visionary are no longer there because our familiar world has changed? What happens when the vibrant colors of life turn to dull shades of ashen gray? Or what do we do when it seems as if the entire world itself has

² Ibid.

suddenly grown dim—with encroaching shadows that, by all accounts, portend that it will become much darker and colder on this planet before we can hope for the light of a new day?

On a personal level, most people go through dark periods like this whenever life gets painful and overwhelming. A devastating medical diagnosis might trigger it; a terrible accident or the loss of someone deeply loved might bring it on; a dramatic change in circumstances may launch a period of mental anguish or emotional hardship that casts a shadow upon the immediate present and future.

Collectively, people go through such dismal periods as well. History is replete with examples of entire generations facing catastrophes and life-altering crises that deeply impact their future sense of wellbeing and identity. Who would Jews be if not deeply scarred by the horrors of the Holocaust, or Palestinians apart from the Nakba and subsequent occupation? How could African-Americans understand their place in the world without accounting for centuries of slavery and racism? What are we, if not changed by the darkest periods of our history or lives?

Such was the case for Jesus and his disciples in the days prior to the story of Easter. Though we know the story well, it still is hard for us to grasp the depth of despair felt by those whose hopes had been so mercilessly dashed—Mary, Peter, John, James, and the others—when everything they had committed their lives to under Jesus’ leadership came to a terrible and sudden end with his death by crucifixion. How was it even possible that a divinely-commissioned mission could be destroyed at all by human hands, let alone in such a rapid series of events? Why would God inspire momentum for the coming of the New Day with all of its brightest hopes, only to be squelched by the existing powers that be?

If we take away the heroic, romantic theology Christian tradition has associated with the cross, Holy Week looks entirely different, as it should. This was a frightening time for those who thought they were about to witness the coming of God's reign on earth, with all things put into proper Jubilee balance, all wounds healed and justice restored, all divinely-inspired deliverance realized, only to see this dream end so quickly and so forcefully in a matter of hours. Not only had Jesus been publicly shamed, tortured, and killed, the temple police were likely looking to arrest his collaborators. The Passover Sabbath had to have been a season of deep darkness for Jesus' followers, many of whom were already in hiding. It was a period of dark days and very dark nights.

In their struggle to orient themselves and make sense of what to do, I imagine the more pastoral types among them could have recalled Jesus' teachings for how to cope with their sudden loss. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Those more defiant among them may have begun to formulate their resistance to the principalities and powers. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Yet, somewhere in the darkness saturating their souls, there may have been those who recalled Jesus' stirring image which now gained more relevance with his absence:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp then puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.

As the common proverb goes, instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle. Act, as you can, with goodness and bring light back into the world. Let your good works show in order to bear witness to what Jesus has taught

and given you. In the darkness of their world, they were called to bring about moral good. Don't hide this light in privacy, but brighten the world around you. Find a way to bring light back into the world. Against the backdrop of the imperial order, Jesus called them to create community in a more just and equitable and merciful manner.

It was about good works—not launching a new religion; good works, not prophetic outrage, insurrection, and violence. Not Gospel piety was he seeking, but Gospel deeds. Good works were the practical evidence of the grassroots transformation—the identifying mark of Jesus' followers. “Not everyone who says...‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of [God].” “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,” as Jesus' brother, James, put it.

Tangible, concrete good works bear witness to and embody the light of life—those who do the will of God, those who reflect the light of Jesus. Be creative in brightening the landscape of life—this is the light that shall keep us alert while living through a dark and difficult time. Doing good is what has kept the light of Christ kindled throughout history. Doing good is when the light returns.

I am usually up before sunrise regardless of the time of year. In the waning months of winter, I yearn so much for the brighter and warmer days of spring. Sometimes, the darkness of winter seems downright oppressive, and I can't imagine what my Norwegian relatives suffer through. Yet, during the winter darkness, I also find myself looking up into the dark sky, only dimly brightened by the coming sunrise, and I marvel at the light I do see. The night sky, even more evident in polar nights, is incredibly radiant with stars and cosmic sights that are amazing. Such a scene is a daily reminder that there is already light in the darkness and that

God is as much the creator of darkness as light. Though we can't help but be oriented toward what comes with the day, sometimes it is darkness that reminds us most of God's presence and what is good. Sometimes there's more light in the darkness than we even realize.

What I mean is, in the darkest periods of life, the expressions of divine and human love through empathy and care from others come in unexpected and memorable ways. Or creative genius usually comes to artists when they struggle with despair. Conversely, those who resist and refuse to accept the presence of sorrow and sadness in their lives find it hard to open themselves up to the compassion of others or discover the relief that comes from their comfort, consolation, or recovery. Darkness can bring forth a good that alters our outlook—a light that will sustain us in ways exceeding our normal sensibilities.

Even more basic than that, darkness is very much a part of the human condition and experience. We are born out of the darkness of our mother's womb—a darkness that allowed us to develop into a person; likewise, we look ahead toward the darkness of our own deaths, but without the reality of death, we would not cherish the sacredness and wonder of life. Darkness can be as valuable, generative, and purposeful as light in so many instances and ways in which we experience this matter we call "life."

The relationship between dark and light are expressed poignantly in the Easter story, as well. The resurrection of Jesus didn't occur in the light of day, but in the darkness before the dawn and deep in the recesses of the tomb. The stunning revelation of what was happening came to his followers when they least expected it, while they wept in the darkness of their sorrow and diminished dreams. The gross injustice of Jesus' crucifixion might never be recognized if not against the bleak background

of institutional callousness and abuses of power that still exist everywhere. By its very nature, resurrection has no meaning apart from death—deliverance has no relevance apart from oppression or the depths of despair. Good is not “good” without the reality of evil, nor evil without the reality of good. They are opposites, to be sure, but they expose and accentuate the meaning and impact of each other.

Perhaps, that’s why the light that returned on Easter has not yet delivered people entirely from the dark times of life or humanity from such periods of history. Darkness exists for good and for evil purposes. The seasons within our hearts and within our world that bring both brilliant and warm days, as well as long, dark nights, still remain linked together, cycling through the rhythms of human existence as the world turns. Why this is continues to be a mystery confounding even the brightest of minds as it remains as observable and unreachable as the stars that emerge in the twilight. These mysteries of life (of light/dark, of good/evil), we leave to the mind and wisdom of God.

But it can be said, just like Easter morn, the light returns to us renewing every life, every generation, and every part of this world when that which is good arises—when lives are brought together in right and just relationship in the spirit of love and mercy for one another, when forgiveness heals the past and reconciliation provides a better future. When the morning light returns, wherever on this earth it rises, it is possible once again to envision and embrace the hope for when the New Day so promised shall come in full and never end.

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