

Don't be afraid of the dark."

Matthew 17:1-9

Don't be afraid of the dark. That's what we tell our young children, even ourselves when night falls and we feel alone, vulnerable, isolated, or plagued by nightmares. And yet, the truth is that most human beings are far more fearful of the light.

The light—that utterly visible and revealing place in which we cannot hide but stand entirely exposed and unveiled—makes us both warm and wobbly. When we stand too fully in the brightness of light, we allow ourselves to be seen in all of our flaws. We feel ourselves laid bare, unprotected, and a feeling of unease begins to settle upon us. Stand fully in the light? Perhaps to bathe in light for a moment would be glorious. To stand revealed to God and others within it for any period of time is difficult because we are seen for who we really are. Most of us would rather not.

We would rather limit the light, at least enough for us to live the image that we would like to project to God, to others, to the world around us, even to ourselves. Human beings prefer to live in a world of half-light and shadows. We want to see the light. We don't want to remain fully exposed within it. We want to project ourselves into the light bit by bit, as we feel safe to do so.

The minds of humans depend largely on images. We create images of how we see ourselves and our world, and we project images of ourselves to those around us. The greater the light, the more authentic the image.

The more willing we are to be vulnerable, the more we step into the light and allow others to see us in a more authentic way. When we feel afraid, we tend to hide in the shadows, retreat to a more protective place. In this way, we all practice the art of "imaging."

Imaging is the way we make sense of our world, and ourselves in relationship to the world and others. God too. It's the way we comprehend who we are in relationship. All humans are in essence instinctive and natural "photographers."

Photography is the art of truth and lies. It's telling stories through vision. It's creating an image for our eyes to relish and know. Through photography, we learn to see in ways that can give us new insights into the world, each other, and ourselves.

Think of the expressions captured by photographs from the past—of sadness, joy, pensiveness, or ecstasy. Think of the beauty of the moon captured in its glory or that one heart-shaped leaf remaining on the branch of a dead tree that we otherwise would have missed if not for capturing its lone image. Photography can home in on minute details or pull back to see a vast, big picture. It can both blur or intensify an image using light. Photographs paint with light to help us pay attention to things we may be missing.

Professional photographers looking to take pictures in nature value a special time of day called "the golden hour." Early dusk, while the sun is beginning to set, the light turns everything into a beautiful glow. Colors blend together, imperfections fade away, and the world looks especially beautiful. We love the vision that the golden hour creates.

When you want to create a romantic evening, what do you do? You lower the lights, you light candles, you dine in the muted glow of fireside and dimmers, you create a "golden" ambience in which you feel assertive yet protected—protected from the harshness of full light. Protected and reassured by the dark.

Anyone who has stood in front of a mirror in the bright light of noon knows the shock of seeing every line and imperfection in your face, every flaw on your skin, every grey hair that glints in the sun. We would rather see ourselves in that golden light, half-dark/half-light, one in which we can pretend for a while that we are the

vision we wish to be, instead of the truth we are not. The truth is –we need the dark. The dark is our hiding place. The shade. The half-light. The dusk. The night.

God created light. Light and dark. Shadows and shades. Images, eyes, and color. God created us in a way that allows us the art of perception and imaging. God created us as human artists.

The art of humanness then depends upon the way we vision and envision. God encourages us toward authenticity, to move more and more into the light, and yet God also provides shadows to shelter us when we feel afraid. God does not force us but assures us toward the light. God, the ultimate Artist, uses Light in revelatory ways sometimes to show us things we may be missing about God, ourselves, and the world. And yet God also provides us places to shelter when the light feels like just too much to bear.

When Jonah felt unsure, angry, and grieving, God provided a dark “womb” of a whale and the shade of a tree. Yet God also allowed for the heat of the day to wake him from his pensive thoughts when his dreaming and contemplating turned to hiding and brooding. When floods covered the earth, God provided Noah with a womb of an ark, but encouraged him back to the land and the light when the storm lifted.

When Paul was confronted with the truth and Light of Jesus, he was so taken off guard that it blinded him for a while in order to sort through what he had experienced. After a time, his vision was restored and yet his image of others had been altered during his time in the dark, womb-like muddle of his thoughts. Much like others Jesus healed, Paul saw when he was ready and able to see. We do the same.

God is a God of patience and an artist of light and shadow. We need both light and dark. We understand God and our world within shades of meaning and gradual revelations of truth. In our scripture for today, Jesus’ disciples are stunned by a vision of Jesus bathed fully in light. In that moment, they were confused and afraid. Their first impulse was to build Sukkot enclosures for the light to dwell within, so that it wouldn’t overtake them.

But God’s light is too big to be captured or controlled. It is an all-encompassing light –the Light that envelopes Jesus is God’s own eminent brilliance. The disciples, when faced with this brilliant, pure, encompassing light are left speechless. It is too hard for them to make sense of. While they can understand Jesus in the human “light” he inhabits and projects –this Light is too blinding for them to understand in its purity and starkness.

It’s no wonder this vision is so brief. The human mind was not created to experience in our lifetime this kind of unfathomable brightness and revelation. When it happens, we are overcome. God knows this, hence come the words: “Do not be afraid.” This phrase –to put away our fear—occurs 365 times in the in scripture. It’s one of the most important and frequent phrases in the Bible. Why?

God knows that faced with ultimate light, ultimate revelation, ultimate truth, even truths about us, are hard for us to handle. For a moment we can experience life-shifting, stunning, revealing flashes of insight. But we then must take time to process what we have seen, to distill the images, to make sense of the pictures and create a story for ourselves about what it means for us and our lives. Think about the times in your life when you have experienced true, life-changing revelations.

Most of our realizations, changes in the way we see things, alterations in our lives come from making our way cautiously from shadow into light. I like to think that’s why God gives us beautiful sunsets, to nudge us and urge us toward the light in ways we find inviting, appealing, safe, and beautiful.

In the same way, God reveals truths about us and God to us –and urges us to stand at least for some time each day in the light. The more we dwell in the light, the more we will feel the beauty and authenticity revealed in our humanness. And the more we will project that beauty comfortably to the world and to others.

The truth is, we don't need to come face-to-face with God in the way the disciples did in Jesus' transfiguration to know God is there or to understand God's glory. All we need to do is practice coming into the light. In prayer, in meditation, in confession, in nature, with ourselves, and with others –revealing ourselves, exposing ourselves, trusting to change our image of ourselves and others, God and the world, one shade at a time. May the light be with you. And may you revel in its beauty, truth, and goodness.

Don't be afraid.