

Monastic Scribe LXXXIII: December 27, 2024

WINTER DARKNESS – OR LIGHT

I hope Santa was good to you. Even more, I hope Christmas time is a joyful season of promise. Memories of childhood, of my parents putting up the tree on Christmas Eve, letting me set up the crèche, a week off from school – these are all good memories. The season has been a time of festival, of lights, parties, music, of hope and expectation. These are all good! And, oh yes, there is also the frenzied shopping and commercialization that excites some people. And, finally, there is the sadness, depression, let-down that also accompanies the “Holidays.”

Is it any wonder that January turns out, for many, to be a bleak, dark, cold time? Flee to Florida if you can! I have always dreaded winter with not only January but February and March that continues the cold trend. But, this year, my advancing age and limited energy, have made me look at other possibilities. Instead of dreading winter cold and darkness, I have begun to see the positive gift that they are. While we bemoan the hard, frozen earth, new life is churning below the surface. Should that be happening to me too? I started life in nine months of darkness!

We are so inundated with artificial light now, that we are not even conscious of natural light. When was the last time you beheld the milky way in the splendor of a night sky? Do you ever consciously stop to behold the darkness before the dawn and then behold the wonder of almost unobservable light slipping through the darkness? When I go for a walk, I notice that some people smile and at least nod hello as they pass while others are in a rush to get past me and ignore my presence. When I pay more attention, I can see the light within a person, maybe shielded by a shade of darkness that weighs them down.

By reading some of the Mystic writers (e.g. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton) I have learned how they call on us to see and feel the darkness to allow real light to get in. To be human and whole, we need to be in relationship with four sources – other humans, the natural order of creation, my own inner self, and the divine, transcendent presence we call God. We have so much light and so much noise that these four relationships are atrophying in our culture.

Christian Wiman, a contemporary poet, makes this statement: “Live long enough in secular culture, long enough to forget that it is secular culture, and at some

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point religious belief becomes preposterous to you. Atavistic. Laughable. I know this was true for me.” God becomes an unmentionable name, to be avoided in any public way. We are blinded to the very presence of God. Do you notice this?

In the recent election, analysts say that people voted on behalf of their personal interests and not the values that sustain the common good of the nation. Our relation to the natural world and the needs of the environment were ignored by both parties. Our extreme individualism allows us to ignore others’ needs, especially those most in need. And the fourth relation, to ourselves? Without quiet, both visual and aural, we never get to know our true selves which should be in harmony with the other three relationships.

One writer, commenting on the election, wrote that he was convinced that people are just not good. I don’t believe that. People are basically good but have been manipulated and deluded by consumerism, big business, an identity of success and a self-centered meaning to their lives. We have become spoiled, entitled, soft and self-reliant. Unlimited purchases, travel, conveniences have become a way of life.

Our souls, overcome with so many pressures, have been neglected. An hour a week at church hardly sustain our spiritual lives, but can actually conform us in our own comfortable lives and maybe comfort us in any struggles we meet along the way. So I suggest we need more darkness and more silence. Real faith begins when we have hit bottom, are at an impasse, when we think there is only darkness.

Now that Advent has been hi-jinxed by light and noise, I am proposing seeing the dark, cold month of January as an invitation to really face God, ourselves, our human race, our created world. Let’s stop running away! Our Jewish ancestors wandered in the darkness of a desert to learn who God really was, the Holy One of Israel. Jesus was born into a dark world, dark physically and dark politically under the reign of Roman authorities. And darkness can teach us to be sensitive, to be vulnerable, to see more clearly. In darkness we accompany “the people who sit in darkness,” the imprisoned, the exiled, the deported. the tortured and the silenced everywhere where people are pushed into this darkness.

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Darkness at first may seem like absence, aloneness. Yet we are not really alone. Silent darkness is a doorway to Utter Presence. God is always there. It is we who are often absent. Wendell Barry encourages us to take a candle out into the dark. "To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, find that the dark too blooms and sings." Be patient of course, slowly get used to darkness. Let the light of God emerge. Does this make any sense? You can let me know at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.