

## **When the Dead-end is the Way Through**

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Genesis 9: 8-17 | Psalm 25:1-10 | I Peter 3:18-22 | Mark 9:9-15

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We just don't take the incomprehensibility of God seriously enough. At least we don't take it seriously enough as an affirmation, as a positive, as something to be ... celebrated.

We tend to see our inability to describe God in clear, unequivocal, statements as a dead-end. We want so badly to make nice straightforward statements about what God is like that we don't realize that our failure to be able to do so is a great gift as well as a real limitation of our humanity.

To put it in a slightly different way: The fact that our theologies cannot be big enough to account for God is one of the best things we can say about them. The dead-end we face in trying to speak of God — when and if we are honest or perhaps wise enough to recognize it — is the way through to faith.

This week's lectionary left me in a pickle. But once I got accustomed swimming in vinegar, I realized what a good thing it is.

In our Old Testament reading, we're told the story of Noah and the rainbow, which seems on the surface all goodness and light. But, of course, while Noah's family floats toward salvation on the top of a mountain, the bodies of the rest of his neighbors float by dead on the surface of the flood. And, then, we're told that God is beginning to feel like he might have over-reacted by killing all of Noah's neighbors, and he promises never to do this again.

The Psalm is a beautiful affirmation of the trustworthiness of the Lord God who makes sure the good are rewarded and the bad get their comeuppance, an affirmation that other Psalms will soundly contradict in their lamentations and calls for divine wrath.

The Epistle reading from First Peter reminds us of the saving power of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, and then refers obliquely to a legend that after his death Jesus descended into the underworld to preach to the folks who drowned in Noah's flood so they can be saved too.

And, finally, our reading from Mark chapter 9 (not from the non-existent chapter 19, as the Presbyterian planning calendar says) tells us of the descent from the Mount of Transfiguration in which Jesus warns the disciples with him not to tell anyone what they saw on the mount until after he dies and rises from the dead. And, in parenthesis, the author of the Gospel tells us that Jesus' warning led to a side conversation among the

disciples who were completely discombobulated about what this “rising from the dead” could possibly mean.

You get the picture. The great chorus of witnesses in our marvelous and sacred Bible not only can’t decide whether the anthem is in a major or a minor key, they can’t even sing the same tune.

Why? Because they are speaking the truth as well as any human beings can about their experience of the God who even in his fullest revelation in Jesus of Nazareth remains ultimately incomprehensible. Because they are bearing witness faithfully to the God who is so far beyond our comprehension that even when he brushes past us on the street he leaves us bewildered. God is too big to describe.

One of the most familiar phrases in the history of Christian spirituality is a phrase that comes from Saint John of the Cross, the incomparable mystic and younger colleague of Saint Teresa of Avila. John lived in the mid-to-late 16th century in Spain, in a time of strife and unrest throughout the western church, as the tide of the Reformation rolled through Europe and the Roman Catholic Church struggled to respond.

The phrase John left us, you’ll recognize immediately: “the dark night of the soul.” It is one of the most frequently quoted and most frequently misunderstood of all the things said about the life of faith.

Most of the time when writers evoke the phrase, “the dark night of the soul,” they are speaking of some experience in which we feel God is absent. They equate darkness with evil or negativity. But that is not what St. John of the Cross meant when he used the phrase, “the dark night of the soul.”

John is speaking spiritually, but his description reminds me of something that happens in the physical world, when we find ourselves in one of those locations (which have become rare today) where the darkness of the night is so complete, where we are far enough from the sources of light pollution, where we can look up into the night sky and *because* it is so dark we can see the stars of the Milky Way.

There are lights we cannot see until it is dark enough. Let me say that again: There are lights we cannot see until it is dark enough.

For St. John of the Cross, “the dark night of the soul” is that condition of our spirits in which all distractions are removed, in which every polluting light that keeps us from seeing and sensing the divine presence is vanquished, so that we can know (in the darkness and because of the darkness) the presence of God in the fullness of God’s mystery and incomprehensible blessedness.

Jesus was, we are told in the gospels, driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. He had nothing to read, not even Gideon's Bible, no way to distract himself, no television news. And Netflix hadn't been invented, and not even Amazon Prime could deliver food and water that far from town. Quarantined he was. There was no relief from facing himself. The darkness of the wilderness nights must have been so absolute we can hardly imagine them. In the daytime, apparently, Jesus was confronted with temptation, but in the dark of night he saw God.

Lent is the season in which we are invited to go into the darkness of the wilderness with Jesus so that we might also see the light of God. We are invited to let go of all those distractions that keep us from facing what we most need to face. The wilderness is a frightening place, at least initially; as is the darkness, at least at first. But as our eyes adjust, our ears attune, our spirits awaken, we begin to observe who it was who brought us here, and why.

Amen.