

Easter Vigil

It was one of the darkest places I'd ever been. My two dogs, husband and I hiked in 4 miles, effectively leaving behind civilization. Night fell quickly in the Dolly Sods, WV. Designated as a dark sky zone, we were free from any light pollution for hundreds of miles around. The darkness drew so close to us, so dark and so deep that it felt like we were wading through it. Beneath us, the round rocks caught our feet as we navigated to an open spot in the trees. Our hopes were fulfilled when there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Lying down on the rocks, looking into the crystal-clear sky, the milky way spread above us, and we'd never seen more stars in our lives. There wasn't a sound around us except the sounds of our breath, which was taken away in amazement by what we were witnessing.

The cold covered us like a blanket and we soon lit a campfire and the previously dark world lit up before us. There's nothing like sitting around a campfire, is there? My family has a tradition of campfires, and it feels like home to gather around it with them. The darkness subsides and we are surrounded by warmth. Tonight, as we lit the first fire of Easter, and processed with each of our flames, it's as if we are gathered around a camp fire. Play with this image a bit for a minute with me. Think about a time you gathered around a fire. Cooking up your favorite foods. Toasting Marshmallows and

making s'mores. Laughter abounds. You sing favorite songs and memories begin to be shared.

There's something about telling stories in the dark that opens up our imagination. Just like we're doing tonight. Tonight is all about the story of God's unending and unlimited love for us in the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. But while tonight is celebrating Jesus destroying death and sin, we can't start with the resurrection. No, we must go back to the beginning. It's as if we're going to God, saying, "tell us about the night we were born." And it's as if God responds with everything we heard tonight. In the beginning, it was dark. And there was no form. So I created light and separated the day from the night. And I created the earth and all that is in it- the sky and the land- and I created plants and trees- and creatures big and small. And, I created you."

This is the story of our birth as a people, beloved by God. We get pieces of how we came to be, how we came to be together as a people, the vignettes of God's love for us. It's as if we're lying outside, looking to the sky, and one by one the stars appear. And we can see so clearly in how each and every bit of the story of our lives God was present. I can imagine God continuing, "I walked beside you through thick and thin, through celebration and heartache. Through oppression and liberation."

No matter how many times we turn away, God never leaves us. God didn't leave us on the cross. God didn't leave us in the grave. And God didn't leave us in death. Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome didn't expect much when they came to the tomb. In fact, they expected to find a very dead Jesus as they brought spices to anoint his body. They wondered even who could help them roll the stone to gain access. But, when they got there, they were alarmed to see not Jesus, but God's messenger, telling them what they should have already known. Despite Jesus telling them what would happen multiple times, that he would be killed and rise again on the third day, they were terrified and amazed. If they remembered the stories of their birth, as people and as a community worshipping God, they would have remembered that God would not have abandoned them, even in the midst of death and the darkest night.

When we find ourselves in the darkest places we've ever been, it's hard to not to be suffocated from what surrounds us. But when we hear about the story of our births from God's point of view, when we hear the stories of our faith and our spiritual ancestors, and when we are able to find a clear view, we recall what we've known all along. God will never leave us. Now, dark sky areas like the Dolly Sods are a diminishing resource due to unshielded, excessive, and poorly aimed artificial lights.¹ That can sometimes happen with our faith lives, too. Unshielded, excessive, and poorly

¹ <https://www.outsideonline.com/1924396/darkest-parks-us>

aimed anything can hurt us and distract us from the real story, the true one we need to focus on and hear.

And that is that God sent Jesus to be one of us. To live and die as one of us. To walk beside us in the flesh so that we may know God more. And know, truly know in our hearts and souls and minds that we are God's beloved from birth to death. That Jesus, both divine and human, did die on the cross. But he did not leave us- as the story didn't end there. The stories of our births and lives are intimately interwoven with his. That as he is raised from the dead, so we are too, that we may truly live. From that resurrection moment everything in our lives may be transformed by God's love. As we begin the glorious season of Easter, embrace Jesus' resurrection light in your lives. God's story is your story and yours God's. Revel in being sent forth as a part of God's story tonight.