

“Walking in the Dark”

Psalm 88

Pastor Charlie Berthoud | Sermon for Sunday, November 14, 2021

Psalm 88 would be near the top of the list of Bible readings LEAST likely to be on a Hallmark card. The psalm reflects darkness and despair felt by someone who feels alone and afraid. We see this in other psalms, but they at least have a sense of hope or an affirmation of faith. There is only darkness and despair in Psalm 88. Walter Brueggemann calls it “an embarrassment to conventional faith.”

Nonetheless, I think Psalm 88 is appropriate for us today on Caregiving Sunday, and I have a few observations before I read it.

- The psalm reflects an urgent and unspecified life-threatening situation. Being unspecified, readers are able to put themselves into the reading.
- The psalmist repeatedly calls out to God, but God is silent and essentially absent throughout the psalm.
- The psalm opens with a reference to night, and darkness permeates the psalm. We can understand the darkness both literally and emotionally.
- The psalmist's predicament reminds us of Job, who also cries out to God, but at least God responds to Job. The crying out of the psalm reflects the reality of the human experience, and it reminds us of Jesus on the cross crying out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me.”

It's long so I'm going to read it in sections.

Listen for God's word:

“O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.”

So the situation is unspecified, but clearly life-threatening. From this initial cry to God, the psalmist intensifies their words by blaming God for the situation.

“You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.
You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow.”

Then the psalmist renews their call to God, asking a series of questions, wondering if God can help in the time of despair, if present in the darkness.

“Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?”

Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?”

After all the crying out and all the questions, there is silence from God. No response at all. The question of whether God’s wonders are known in the darkness hangs in the air, unanswered.

The psalmist continues to cry out and the final word of the psalm in the NRSV is darkness.

“But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.”

Sometimes we all feel like we’re lost in a dark forest, in extended periods of despair, or fear, or heaviness.

It may be grieving the death of a loved one, or a broken relationship, or shattered dreams, or a sense of being stalled in life, or whatever. We’ve all been there.



Maybe you are there right now.

Today is as good a day as any to remind one another: It's OK to not be OK.

Life is hard right now, with Covid, the economy, the political strife, the environmental crisis, the courtroom trials, and more. Many of us, myself included, are exhausted and weary and feel the darkness.

And sometimes we wonder why God doesn't do something.

In times like this, we need each other, we need to take care of each other.

Today is our Caregiving Sunday, a time for us to give thanks for the caregivers in our church and in our lives.

Thank you.

Thank you to official caregivers and to unofficial caregivers.

Thank you to those who do small deeds of kindness.

Thank you to those who are caregiving for the long haul.

Thank you for your willingness to let others care for you when you're in a place of darkness and despair.

And thanks to Donna Monson, who has been a wonderful caregiver here at Covenant for decades.

But with my gratitude, I want to offer a word of caution, inspired by Psalm 88.

Sometimes we caregivers move too quickly, trying to get people out of the darkness.

After a tragedy or a time of sadness, we try to find happy things to say. When someone dies, we say “Don’t cry; Grandma is in heaven.”

We tell jokes with the hope of making people smile or change the topic with the hope that they will forget their sadness.

We go into the dark rooms and turn on all the lights—literally or metaphorically—trying to change the mood as quickly as possible.

But sometimes, no matter what, the darkness lingers.

My brother died 14 years ago—the worst day of my life. I remember about a month later, a member of the church I was serving asked me when I was going to “snap out of it” and be happy again. She hadn’t learned what many of us have learned—that grief stays with us for a while. I’m not as sad as I was, far from it, but I’m still sad. There is still darkness.

Sometimes we religious people (myself included) are too quick to throw an upbeat Bible verse at someone who is struggling: “Don’t be sad! Remember that God loves you and that Jesus is the light of the world!” as if that will instantly make things better.

It’s as if we go to someone with a broken leg and grab them and pull them up by the shoulders and say “Come on now, you’ll be OK. Just put on a smile and let’s keep going.”

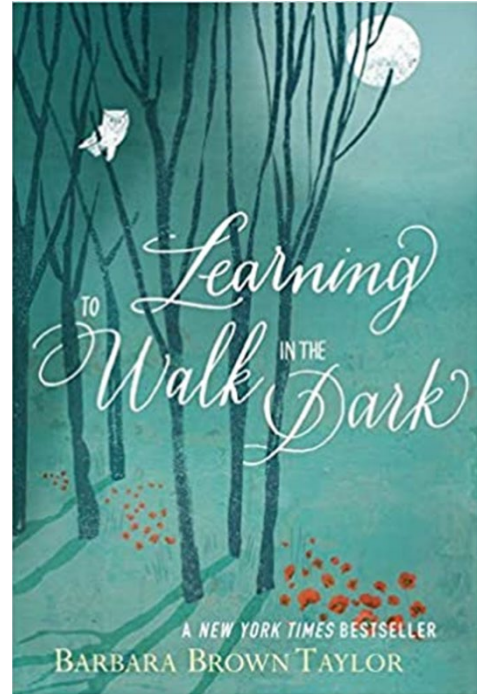
There is a time and place for optimism, positivity, hope, and all those uplifting Bible verses. But there is also a time to just slow down, stop talking, and sit in the dark—with our friends and loved ones, and even alone.

Psalm 88 reminds us that we may need to sit in the dark for a while, maybe a long while, before we start walking again.

Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor offers insightful and helpful reflections on this topic in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

She writes about living in rural Georgia, away from the lights of the city. She reflects on a trip to a cave, along with what mystics have called “the dark night of the soul.” She tells about meeting blind people who helped her realize some of the ways she is blind.

And she reflects on the creation story in Genesis 1, the first words of our Bible, where we read about God created light, as the darkness was already there. And she notes that despite our assumptions and traditional understandings, the text does not say that darkness is bad.



She invites us to rethink darkness, to sit with it, to listen to it, to learn from it. Her book is not a self-help manual about how to deal with depression or trauma or grief. But it is a fascinating reflection, encouraging us to reconsider our assumptions about darkness. I need to ponder this book some more.

One more thing about Psalm 88. The final verse of Psalm 88, according to the New Revised Standard Version is:

“You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.”

But translation is a subjective undertaking, and I find it helpful to read a variety of versions of a text. Most other translations render the Hebrew of Psalm 88:18 quite differently:

“You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.” (NIV)

The difference is striking:

“My companions are in darkness”

“Darkness is my closest friend”

We see it elsewhere:

“You’ve made my loved ones and companions distant.

My only friend is darkness.” (CEB)

“You made lover and neighbor alike dump me;

the only friend I have left is Darkness.” (TM)

When I read “my only friend is darkness,” I hear a song in my head—the classic Simon and Garfunkel folk song, “The Sound of Silence,” which begins with the plaintive words: “Hello darkness my old friend.”

Released in 1965, the song was introduced to a new generation by the band Disturbed, with a remake in 2015, the fiftieth anniversary. The video of the remake has 760 million views; understandably so. It’s great.

Many people have wondered what the meaning of “The Sound of Silence” and that opening line.

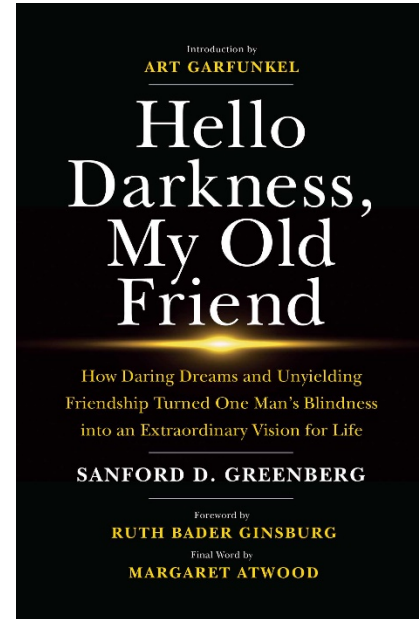
Like any good song, there are many ways to understand its meaning. A year or so after the song was published, Art Simon summed up the song’s meaning as “the inability of people to communicate with each other, not particularly intentionally but especially emotionally, so what you see around you are people unable to love each other.”

We get another angle on the song we see in the recent memoir from Sanford “Sandy” Greenberg, who was college roommate with Art Garfunkel at Columbia University in New York City.

They became close friends, studying and singing together. And they made a pact to be there for each other in times of trouble.

In his junior year, Greenberg suddenly went blind. He lost friends and struggled to find his way, so he dropped out of college. Garfunkel flew to Buffalo and urged Greenberg to return.

Garfunkel led his blind friend around campus. He kept their dorm room meticulously neat so Greenberg could find his way around. And he read books to Greenberg. Sometimes Garfunkel referred to himself as Darkness. He would say things like: “Sanford, Darkness is going to read you *The Iliad*.”



One time they were down by Grand Central Station, a few miles south of the Columbia campus on Manhattan. Garfunkel suddenly said that he had to go, leaving Greenberg alone and terrified. He groped his way along, bumped into people, spilling their coffee, making them angry. He made it to the subway and eventually managed to get back to campus, bruised, bloodied, and humiliated, saying it was the worst couple hours of his life.

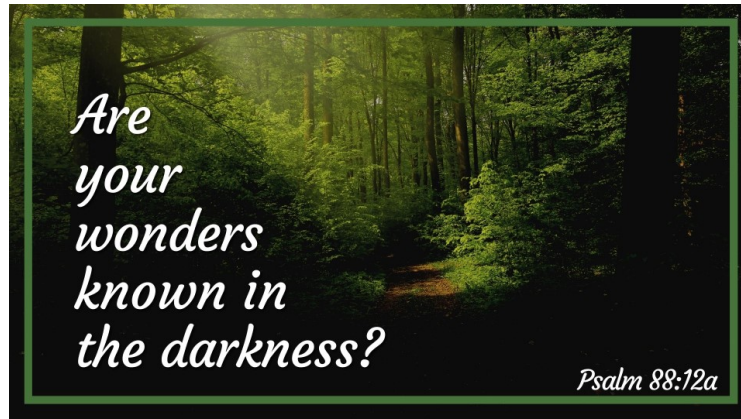
He then heard Garfunkel’s voice and was enraged, but then learned that Garfunkel had been with him the whole time, following behind him with the risky but ultimately successful plan of helping Greenberg learn more about how to walk in the dark.

Greenberg went on to Harvard and Oxford and became a famous philanthropist. He has remained close friends with Garfunkel.

And so Paul Simon wrote those famous opening words, “Hello darkness my old friend”, in part reflecting the friendship of Greenberg and Garfunkel.

<https://people.com/music/art-garfunkel-lifetime-bond-sanford-greenberg-college-roommate/>

Garfunkel wasn't able to cure his friend's blindness. But he was able to sit with him, listen to him, encourage him, and be with him, and to help him find his way.



Friends, darkness is part of life. Yes the light is good. And yes Jesus is the light of the world. But when we're in the darkness, we can learn new things, and we can take care of each other, and when we're ready, take a few steps forward. Maybe God's wonders are indeed known in the darkness.

Let us pray.....