

I admit it. I don't like these lessons one bit.

I do, however, love *love love* the collect for the first Sunday in Advent – especially the opening sentence:

“...give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...”

I began thinking about what this might mean for me and you as we enter the season of, as one of my friends described it, a pregnant pause.

What kinds of works of darkness do I engage in?

How do I cast them away?

What on earth is armor of light and how do I wear it?

Well, first things first.

Darkness.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness. From earliest times, Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death.” * Rev. Brown Taylor believes that darkness has something to teach us. I think she's right.

But I disagree with her when she posits that we shouldn't try to see our way through it. My favorite quote from my mentor, the Revd. Stephen Smith, is that when you're going through hell, keep going. A corollary to that might be "When you find yourself in darkness, light's just around the corner, but you may stumble a little getting out of it."

Let's face it. Stumbling is how we learn. Yet, we can't live forever in a stumbling gait.

How do we get ourselves into darkness anyhow? First, I don't think darkness is limited to just the absence of full-spectrum light. I believe it's a state where you have been convinced that the world is small and scarcity is the rule of the day. This limitation may have been imposed upon you or has been created by you. It doesn't matter.

The point is that in "darkness" it is difficult to imagine anything outside the small box you find yourself in. In "darkness" light cannot shine in or out.

Not only are you prevented from seeing the lightness from without, your inner lightness is also dimmed to the point where you can only stumble.

Christine Valters Paintner, founder of an online monastery called “Abbey of the Arts”, created a means through which we can stumble through darkness on the way to light. She sees our stumbling blocks as

1. Unending barrage of sounds and images.
2. A heart hardened against people and things with which we are not familiar.
3. Unhealthy solitude.
4. Separation from nature.
5. The inability to see work as ministry.
6. A culture of busyness.
7. Lack of community.

So, how are these stumbling blocks manifest in today’s culture?

They look or sound like

- smartphones with earbuds
- elevator music everywhere

- binging movies and mysteries on Netflix

They look or sound like

- Angry talk show hosts
- Racial slurs
- Poverty-stricken neighborhoods

Their consequences are

- A polluted world, threatened by changing climate
- Lack of respect for life in all forms
- a perspective that we need only care about the world we can see

They endanger us by promoting life

- Without hope or joy
- Feeling (and most likely being) taken for granted
- Filled with fear
- Lacking friendship and companionship

They create illusions that

- What we produce defines us
- we can create our own salvation
- we don't need God or each other

Light. We need light.

We need light to help us see and then remove the stumbling blocks, we need strategies to bring light into the darkness. To this end, Christine Paintner created “The Monk Manifesto”. It is a list of commitments each of us can make at any time of year, but especially during Advent.

The Monk Manifesto

1. I commit to finding moments each day for silence and solitude, to make space for another voice to be heard, and to resist a culture of noise and constant stimulation.
2. I commit to radical acts of hospitality by welcoming the stranger both without and within. I recognize that when I make space inside my heart for the unclaimed parts of myself, I cultivate compassion and the ability to accept those places in others.
3. I commit to cultivating community by finding kindred spirits along the path, soul friends with whom I can share my deepest longings, and mentors who can offer guidance and wisdom for the journey.

4. I commit to cultivating awareness of my kinship with creation and a healthy asceticism by discerning my use of energy and things, letting go of what does not help nature to flourish.
5. I commit to bringing myself fully present to the work I do, whether paid or unpaid, holding a heart of gratitude for the ability to express my gifts in the world in meaningful ways.
6. I commit to rhythms of rest and renewal through the regular practice of Sabbath and resist a culture of busyness that measures my worth by what I do.
7. I commit to a lifetime of ongoing conversion and transformation, recognizing that I am always on a journey with both gifts and limitations.

Advent is a time of expectation. As we anticipate the coming of our Lord, we should examine where and what our stumbling blocks are. How are they blocking our view of the light? How do we clear the path in order to go deeper into our relationship with God?

Can it be that from our endings, new beginnings God creates?

Take our fears, then, Lord and turn them into hopes for life anew.

Give us hope and faith and gladness. Show us what there yet can be.

Amen.

*from *In Praise of Darkness* by Barbara Brown Taylor.