

## NIGHT VISION

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Here they come again . . . apocalyptic images of darkness, gloom, chaos and tribulation — creating an unsettling resonance with nature's turbulence at this time of year. "People will faint from fear for what is coming upon the world". Brooding, grey, end-of-November days present a tabula rasa upon which we may project unsettling memories, unexpired bereavements and primordial angst. We avoid lingering in the valleys of grief. But valleys have some thing to teach us.

In collective cultural denial, we press prematurely for the joy of the Nativity, believing that if we just get busier, things will get better. But perhaps we should not push away our grief or our blues so feverishly. Pain suppressed multiplies and bears bitter fruit. Our hope lies not in numbing the pain, but in bravely opening up to it. The darkness has something to teach us. The deepest dark of the coldest winter nights reveals millions of brilliant stars.

In today's gospel, Jesus warns his disciples, "Be alert. Be on guard." Being alert is not the same as being scared or defensive. We easily become saturated with media-driven news of murder and mayhem, war and disease. From the massacre at Fort Hood, to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, from H1N1 to natural disasters of floods, famines, earthquakes, fires and typhoons . . . it seems we are besieged by terrifying news. Fear sells products and movements. The media can stimulate our appetite for hysteria and adrenaline. Anxious living is mistaken for vitality. Of course, we do have choices about what we expose our hearts and minds to.

The good news in the gospel is "when all these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." When everything is falling apart be alert to grace. When all heck is breaking lose, know that the Kingdom of God is near. A former chaplain of mine used to say, "Where there is death, there is hope."

So when Jesus says to be watchful, on guard and alert, I don't think he is calling for the culture of angst to which we have become conditioned. He is not talking about a pandemic PTSD characterized by jumpiness, reactivity and aggression. What he has in mind, I believe, is very different. . . a centered mindfulness and balanced awareness that comes from within. It is the unanxious presence that Jesus himself has in the midst of storms at sea, on the cross, or as he prepares the bread and wine for the last meal with his friends. This is mindfulness not born of fear but of faithful and courageous openness to the moment.

It is spiritual patience, balance and stillness. We would rather, *do* something; put out the fire, fix a problem, find a quick solution or a make a hasty exit. What would it meant to be watchful in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, in the early morning and the bright light of day? To be watchful dark in the dark season of nature or in human affairs, we must develop night vision. What is this night vision like?

It was a blustery night in the foothills of Cornwall, Connecticut. Two friends and I decided to leave a cozy fire and the company of another companion to venture out into a gathering, uncivilized darkness. As we put on our boots, a wild wind howled outside, threatening and

beckoning. Boisterous gusts down-drafted through the chimney disrupting the flames below while blowing ash into the living room. A pregnant dampness filled the air outside. Rain was in the forecast. After a day of sitting through long, tedious meetings, the prospect of exercise and fresh air was appealing.

The ancient "Ruach", the wind and breath of God, the same moving spirit that warned Noah of frightening things to come, the same breeze that made Eden's flowers dance, the very tempest gales that hunted down poor Jonah, that very same Ruach was stirring on this night. Who were we to resist its call? Outside, the sky was utterly black, completely impenetrable, undisturbed by light. We were in the woods. There were no houses nearby which might have cast some ambient light our way. It seemed that we were blindfolded as we stepped tentatively into the whirling gloom.

Surely a wind like this could blow down a branch or a tree on the road, or on us! Fortunately, our host knew the contours and general direction of the rough dirt driveway as we headed down towards a country road.

We felt oddly exhilarated as we walked blindly and yielded to the raucous invitation of the night winds. We were not searching for the place of wild things so much as to re-awaken the wildness of our own souls. Dragging my feet along the driveway, feeling with my shoes for obstacles, I remembered another night-hike years before, and recalled that I would start to see something after a while. How was my vitamin A intake? Had I eaten enough carrots lately?

As we rounded a bend in the driveway, the last trace of light from our host's home vanished, and we encountered an even greater wall of woodsy darkness. We saw nothing and nothingness as we gingerly moved forward. We were watchful but for what were we watching?

It was wonderful to embark upon this journey together. A closeness and trust developed gently as we ventured on. Our night journey was a shared prayer where there was no obvious way. An ambulatory act of faith that heightened our companionship.

Walking together . . . *not* talking is just fine, and talking, when it happens, comes naturally from the heart. Thus it was with the three of us as we went along not seeing but seeing, talking and not talking. When we did converse, we pulled down items from the cupboards of our lives that might not have been taken off the shelf in the glare of daylight.

And, yes, gradually, we received night vision. At first, we could only distinguish between greater and lesser darkness. We could see the road, large boulders, then trees. Gradually, we made more subtle discernments: small branches, puddles and even shadows. I closed my eyes when a car drove by. It's odd when light becomes the spoiler of clearer vision. In the nocturnal darkness, you may see things you would not see in the daylight.

As we moved through this shadow-land, we settled into an un-anxious mindfulness.

A delicate mist blew across our faces and reminded us that rain was not far away. At one point, we intentionally left the dirt road, entering a field through a wide break in the stonewall, where I supposed tractors had come and gone. Harvest time was well past. No tractors were here now. A vast, rounding meadow lay before us. We stopped. Really stopped.

No talking or moving. We stopped everything except breathing and listening to the sound of our own heartbeats and the wind whistling through leafless trees, stirring wet grasses. We stood

transfixed for a long time. Or was it a short time? How often do words break community instead of creating it? In the beginning, there were, I imagine, times when God was silent for untold millennia.

It was hard to leave the genius of that time and place. It is the paradoxical nature of the impermanent to connect us with eternity. And who wants to leave eternity?

The time came to turn back to the country road. After we'd gone some distance further, we decided to turn around and go back to the home, the fire and the friend. Then the rain began to fall, at first lightly, and then earnestly. None of us seemed to care about getting wet.

We didn't mind the rain. As we came towards our host's driveway, there was a light in the distance that was so glaring I was afraid we would miss our turnoff. But we didn't. We got back safe and sound, quickened and somehow changed.

Advent takes place when our hemisphere is farthest from the sun. The days grow shorter, the nights longer. Many grow faint and weary from lack of sunlight. There is a growing sense of chaos and dysfunction. This season is particularly hard for those who gaze at the empty chair across the room, recalling the loved one who once sat there.

Yet we watch and wait for an infant God to come into this world of cascading turmoil, and to be beside us in our confusion. We watch and then we begin to hope.

Advent is the time of the night journey. How difficult that journey is when taken alone! We, the unenlightened, head out with faltering footsteps into the starless night. We are not able to see. We are fearful about tripping and falling. But--- there is also the possibility that communion and community will be born out of the bleakness. It is the time to pray for night vision. There is the prospect of new birth in the pregnant whirlwind. We believe there is a very beautiful and warm light at the end of the tunnel.

Let us go together into the dimness, where the wild and good things are ---to see--- what we might become --- together.

### **Luke 21:25-36**

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

