

From the Pastor's Desk

December Darkness

Three cheers for darkness. I wish we had more of it outside our home. The nearby street light pushes away the darkness required to see the stars. Barbara Mahany, author of **"Slowing Time: Seeing the Sacred Outside Your Kitchen Door"** (Publishers Weekly named it one of the top 10 religion books for 2014) points out the value of darkness:

Darkness is alluring and calls me to turn inside, to be hushed, to pay attention. In December, most everyone else complains about the unbroken darkness. It is sad that we've blinded ourselves from the God-given ebb and flow of darkness and light. It's poetry, the rise and fall of incandescence and shadow, measured in lumens per square foot. But it is lost on us in the bright lights and big city.

The fact is, we live in a lightbulb world: LED, CFL, halogen, fluorescent—blaring, glaring, blinking 24/7, especially in modern-day December. I say, celebrate the darkness—landscape of discovery, of finding our way only by engaging, igniting, heightening our deeper senses, the senses of the heart and the soul, the intellect and the imagination.

The truth is darkness draws out our deep down depths. Darkness is womb, is seed underground. Darkness is where birthing begins, an incubator of unseen stirring enabling essential and fundamental growing. December is when God cloaks the world, or at least the northern half of the globe, in what amounts to a prayer shawl. Its darkness invites us inward into a deepening, paradoxical spiral where we ascend, we vault from new depths.

At nightfall in December, at that blessed in between hour, when the last seeds of illumination are scattered, and the stars turn on—all at once as if the caretakers of wonder have flown through the heavens sparking the wicks—we too, huddled in our kitchens or circled around our dining room tables, strike the match. We kindle the flame. We shatter darkness with all the light we can muster.

The liturgical calendar, prescriptive in its wisdom, lights the way: It gives us Advent, season of anticipation, of awaiting, of holding our breath for spectacular coming. Season of dappling the darkness with candled crescendo.

And therein is the sacred instruction for the month: Make the light be from you. Deep within you. Seize the month. Reclaim the days. Employ ardent counter-culturism, and do not succumb.

Here is a radical thought, for December or otherwise: Live sacramentally—yes, always. But most emphatically in the month of December. What do I mean? To be sacramental is to lift

even the most ordinary moments into Holiness. Weave the liturgical into the everyday. Look to Jesus, for starters. Bread and wine, everyday agrarian foodstuffs, he made into the most sacred sacramental feast.

And why? Why are we screeching the brakes, dialing down all the noise? Why are we ardently not joining in on a December punctuated by office-party folderol, and speed-dial shopping, and holiday cards canon-balled out of the printer, without so much as a touch of the human hand?

Because this is our one chance at December this year—and who knows how many Decembers we might have.

December is invitation. December is God whispering, “Please. Come. Closer.” Discover abundance within. Marvel at the gifts I’ve bestowed. Listen for the pulsing questions within, the ones that beg—finally—to be asked, to be answered: Am I doing what I love? Am I living the life I was so meant to live? Am I savoring, or simply slogging along?

December is invitation. Glance out the window. Behold the silence of the first snowfall. Stand under heaven’s dome and watch the star-stitched wonder: Orion, Polaris. Listen for the love songs of the Great Horned Owl. Be dazzled. To be dazzled is a prayer.

Mary Oliver, the poet saint, tells us, “attentiveness is the root of all prayer”. And reminds us that our one task as we walk the snow-crueted woods or startle to the night cry of the sky-crossing goose is “Learning to be astonished”.

Ever astonished.

Renaissance scholar and poet Kimberly Johnson says, “I want to live my life in epiphany.”

So do I.

Maybe, so do you.

And December, at the cusp of winter, season of fury and stillness, December demands our attention. It is a month draped in myth and legend. It is a month that rings with the power of the simplest story, the one we wait for—childlike, rapt, noses pressed to the window, scanning the heavens for bright and shining light.

December invites us to be our most radiant selves. And we find that radiance deep down in the heart of darkness, spoken by the One who Breathed the First Breath.

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