

Rushing into the Dark
Rev. Kathleen Owens
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Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As if some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

...

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, 'Lenore!'
Merely this and nothing more.¹

Edgar Allan Poe was a master at verse and prose – drawing the reader in and stirring up the fears and fright about what the night held, about what was lurking in the dark, in the silence. Rushing into the dark...it's a strange title perhaps...it is almost counter-intuitive to do that, isn't it? In fact, I don't know of any one or any literary character, except maybe Dracula, who does, in fact, rush into the dark. What is it about darkness that holds us back? Now before I get too far into this sermon, I want to acknowledge that there is a tie in our culture between a fearful dark night and people of color. One only has to watch the news or see most movies and in general, the

¹ Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven", 1845.

villain is a person of color and strikes at night. I disagree with cultural interpretation and think it produces nothing but fear and bias and that's a whole other sermon for another service that coming in the New Year.

Today, I want to talk about the darkness of night and how our own fears can get the best of us sometimes. Often we are our own worse enemy about these things. We can imagine all sorts of things going bump in the night. One way we try to handle or mitigate our fears is through humor...the cartoon figure of Snoopy comes to mind. Every now and then in the comic strip he would start writing a story and it always began, "'It was a dark and stormy night"² (Ken played some scary music on the organ)...I rarely watch scary movies and the few times I do, the music always signals that something bad is going to happen next...music has such power – and I'm grateful to Ken for helping demonstrate this point this morning. In music the use of silence is compelling and is a part of the creation of the piece. And that silence, like the use of darkness in pictures, silence in music can intensify the fear created by a piece of music. Remember the music from the movie Jaws...{you know what I mean, the person is treading water and then we hear it...da dum, ...da dum...da, dum, dad um,) those moments of silence build the anticipation and heighten our fears.

It is interesting to me what we have done to learn to live with realities like the dark night, silence and the unknown. I think about Halloween and how when I was a kid we were encouraged to dress up as something scary and go out into the night – perhaps there was the thought that if we dressed up like something we feared, maybe we wouldn't fear it so much? I'm not sure but I am fascinated with our hesitancy to embrace the dark night...and in this season when the night comes so early – in this holiday time and season it seems our culture does all it can to distract us from the dark with the glamour and glitz of lights and noise, jingle bells and

² Peanuts Cartoon, Snoopy writing his novel.

carols and candles. Please don't misunderstand, I do enjoy those things a lot – especially lights and candles and carols. There is something magical about a small bright light in the deep of night. And I enjoy these things especially when they are in balance with the dark.

There is something that I find healing and nurturing about the dark...if we will let it. Next Sunday begins the season of advent. It is that time of waiting and watching for the light. The light is a symbol of hope, an end to the darkness and the return of the sun – it is the promise of longer and warmer days. And I'm all for that too – but right now, today, I want to relish in the dark. I want to sit and prepare, even for the time of waiting and watching for the light, I want to slow down and enjoy and the dark – for in the dark, there are things to savor, things to learn, things to feel and know. One of those things is our own being.

We are so busy. We rush around to finish our to do lists at work, to get those holiday gifts, to get that letter written and those holiday cards in the mail...especially in this season there can be so much that we can lose ourselves. Some years ago there was a popular saying among some folks when the word Christmas was being abbreviated x-mas. The saying on buttons was, "put Christ back into Christmas." But with all the busyness of this season we have found a million ways to distract ourselves from what is happening in nature. Learning to relax into the early approach of night, into a place of silence in this season could bring a peace all its own and in that peace, we may find ourselves in communion again with the cycle of nature, perhaps in communion with that which was there long before religions started placing dogma onto top of it. "the earth took me back so tenderly, I slept as never before, a stone on the riverbed, all night I heard the small kingdoms breathing around me, ...all night I rose and fell, as if in water, by morning I had vanished at least a dozen times into something better."³

³ From Mary Oliver's poem, *Sleeping in the Forest*.

I know there can be some real reasons to be cautious about the dark... Once upon a time, "In a village hidden far away on the edge of a dense forest in Northern Europe, there lived a small, contented little community. There was no crime and so no policemen. Nothing much ever happened there, so there were no newspapers. But a night watchman used to walk around the village every night, just to make sure that no danger was lurking. Imagine the consternation, therefore, when one morning, the villagers awoke to find the watchman lying on the ground," very dead and somewhat eaten and paw prints on the ground all around him. "A wolf!" the villagers cried. 'Surely this can only be the work of a wolf' living in the forest.

They buried the night watchman and weeks passed by. Eventually, the villagers became less vigilant. Until, that is, when the wolf visited them again one night and seized an elder who had been out late bringing in the wash.

A few weeks later, another villager had disappeared and children were no longer allowed to play outside after the sun went down.

The villagers called a meeting. Now it happened that there was a wise old man who lived in a hermit's cave, just outside the village. The people called upon him for help.

'Please rid us of this terrible scourge,' they begged him. They had their own ideas about how this might be done.

'Kill the wolf for us,' some asked.

'Show us how to surround ourselves with high fences, so that the wolf won't be able to reach us,' others pleaded.

'Turn the wolf into a cuddly lamb that we can tame and pet,' was the request of a third group of villagers.

'I'll see what I can do,' the wise hermit promised, and that very same night, he waited until it was dark, and then he ventured, all alone, into the dense forest. He walked and walked, until he could feel the wolf very close to him. He could hear its breathing and see the green glint of its hungry eyes. For a moment, the wolf and the hermit seemed to be having a deep conversation, then the hermit returned to the village, unharmed.

The next day, the villagers crowded round him. 'Did you kill it?' some of them asked.

'Will you show us how to build our fortress?' others pleaded.

'Have you turned it into a woolly lamb?' demand the rest.

The hermit shook his head. 'It's much simpler than that,' he told them. 'You only need to feed it!'

At first, the people were aghast. 'How can we feed it?' they asked. 'Why should we feed it,' they complained, 'after all it has done to harm us?' But after a while, at nightfall, when they heard the pad, pad, pad of the wolf prowling through their streets, they would push bowls of food outside – at first, fearfully, and resentfully, and then more confidently.

Soon, the wolf was a nightly guest. He never again harmed a hair on their heads, and they were proud to be known, throughout the land, as the village that feeds its wolf.⁴

Our centering thought this morning says "Be not afraid." In the Christian story, it is the angels who speak these words to shepherds who, watching their flock during the night, experience something unusual. "Be not afraid." Is there a wolf in your village, in your life that needs feeding? How hard it is to make that choice – to turn toward something that is scary and instead of recoiling in fear, how difficult and seemingly unnatural to turn toward it with a gesture of care. Perhaps this spiritual work might be easier for us if we were not so afraid of the dark in

⁴ "The Wolf in the Woods" a Franciscan story from [one hundred Wisdom Stories from around the World](#), page 126.

the first place. If the dark were a place in our lives that was nurturing rather than fearful, if we had learned to appreciate rather than avoid the dark, how would our lives, attitudes and activity be different?

And I wonder what it would look like – to feed the wolf. To do so means we need to be careful, and pay attention – it also means taking care...of extending yourself to another. This is hard to do if we are busy rushing around to fulfill all of the expectations others and we have about this season. Increasing our comfort level with the wolf in the dark demands we address some basic needs, rather than killing it, avoiding it by hiding behind a fence or trying to make it into something it will never be. I think becoming at ease in the dark means we choose to face our fears and to wait – patiently, in the silence, in the stillness for peace to come. We have grown out of balance I think in our comfort level with being in the dark...of waiting...of holding still...of welcoming the night traveler and the gifts that he or she may bring...comfort can be found in waiting, in the dark...peace can be found in the stillness – and isn't that what advent, this short season before the big celebration of light, of new life, of love and hope...this is what advent is about, isn't it? Light, in balance is important, yes...and yet, before we head into the season of candles and light, I invite you to instead, rush or walk or inch into the dark – for some needed rest, find for yourselves some comfort... slow down and intentionally be still – for a moment and let the dark nurture you, seep into you and bring about healing and peace.

The meditation hymn we sang earlier invited the dark of winter to bring its quiet to us, invited the darkness to soothe our eyes that we may see more clearly. And then, when we have been still and comforted, our soul may sing of love eternal. Darkness, when our fears arise, let your peace flow through me. Because this has been a more experiential service than most, you are invited to sit and allow the music to take you into that place of quiet.

[Ken plays and we sit in silence for a full minute or more] May peace be with you. Amen.

Benediction – May the light around us guide our footsteps and hold us fast to the best and most righteous that we seek. May the darkness around us nurture our dream and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of our world. Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move. May it be so.