

*Seeing
in the
Dark*

*finding God's light in the
most unexpected places*

NANCY ORTBERG



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Seeing in the Dark: Finding God's Light in the Most Unexpected Places

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Introduction

LAST MONTH JOHN AND I were in Turkey celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary. On one memorable day, our tour guide took us deep into a cave that was carved out more than fifteen hundred years ago by nomadic people who followed Christ, living in a land of those who did not.

It was a stumbling, slow walk in the dark. After following the path for some time, largely guided by the sound of our leader's voice and the narrow, cold walls on either side of us, we stopped.

As our eyes slowly adjusted, we saw in front of us a small room—a church—carved out of the cave centuries before. When our guide shone a slight beam from his flashlight against the walls, we were astonished by what we saw. Frescoes, painstakingly drawn by hand, still retained vivid colors of red, yellow, and blue. We saw sitting areas hewn out of rock and crosses of various designs carved into the walls. Much of the stone surface was charred black from the candles the worshippers had brought with them. This was a room where

the light had burned for long periods of time. This was a room that reminded the Christ followers that there was light, even in the darkest and deepest of places.

I was struck by the intentional effort these people had applied to this one room.

Other rooms were strictly for survival. A small room carved out of the rock, five or six stories below the surface of the earth, designed for food preparation. A fire-pit area with an elaborate ventilation system. An area for milling grain. Other rooms were for sleeping, with multiple hallways connecting them for escape if necessary.

But this room was not necessary. At least not from a physical survival perspective. Yet more effort had gone into this one area than all the others combined. None of the other rooms contained art or color or symbols. In the midst of fighting for survival, these early believers had given some of their best and most time-consuming efforts to create this space to gather and worship.

This room *was* necessary. Perhaps their survival was more dependent on what they experienced in this room than on what happened in the kitchen, which kept them alive in a different way.

Our guide explained that the church had been built here because above ground, the faith community's journey was dark. They were being hunted and persecuted, so they went below ground, where it was dark as well—just a different kind of dark. Hundreds of years later, we stood on that ground below the ground, reminded that we were not the

first to stumble and see in the dark. The walls continued to speak.

The references in the Bible to light in dark places are numerous. From Genesis to Revelation, light penetrates the darkness in bold and soothing ways. In the beginning, while the darkness hovered, God exploded the world into flourishing with “Let there be light.” Light is offered as relief for dark paths and unknown futures. God’s face is described as light¹; his garments are a wrapping of light. God’s people are called the “light of the world.” God’s light is so powerful in us that it can’t help but leak out. Light is there—a synonym for truth and a name for Jesus. And not just a light, but the Light of the World.² God knows we need some.

Just as numerous are the Bible’s references about the way we see in imperfect and incomplete ways, like a mirror that reflects and distorts an image at the same time. “How faint the whisper we hear of him!” Job says (Job 26:14).

And yet we are called to this journey of faith, with eyes that cannot properly focus and light that reveals only the next step. We are compelled to take that next step with merely a tug in our souls rather than the clear path we long for. We get a glimpse when what we want is a panoramic view.

What’s a person to do?

Take the next step, I suppose. At least that’s how it has worked—not just for me, but for most of the Christ followers I know, and as I emerged from the cave system that day, I realized that this is how it has been for Christ followers through the centuries.

Courage is putting one foot in front of the other when all you can see is a faint outline of the future. Or facing that future when it looks not at all how you'd imagined. It's having the humility to admit a wrong turn, the resilience to try again, and the grace to not let it crush you.

Faith is a funny word—it implies a gap, but we are looking to do away with that gap. We are looking for answers carved in stone, and we get a word. We are searching for certainty, and we get mystery and reflection. We think we would be safe in certainty, and yet it eludes us. We want enormous floods of light, and we get a flicker.

A majestic scene in nature stirs something deep within us that cannot be explained by factor analysis. And the things that can be explained do not grip us at the same level. We have such hopes for our lives and our loved ones; then a tragedy hits, and nothing is ever the same. Yet over time, joy and hope and beauty raise a tiny tendril of faith back into our lives, and we cannot explain it. We are seeing in the dark.

Perhaps that is most of what our faith journey is. Scripture seems to be full of stories of that ilk—of people who took the next step when they were trembling in the shadows. Yet somewhere between when we read those stories and when we are left to imagine them, they take on a quality of assuredness that is simply not there. From Genesis to Revelation, God's people have been asked to take the next step when they cannot see the next step. That's the invitation you and I have been given as well.



Right around one year old, each of our three children began their first attempts at walking. For the few months before, they had been in various stages of crawling and pulling themselves up. Mobility seemed to compel them onward, even when their initial tries landed them in frustration or falls.

Their chubby little hands would grasp something just a bit higher than they were, and with comical wobbliness, they would pull themselves upright in jerky movements. With the great confidence that being upright seemed to instill, they would take that first step. A small, slow smile would spread across their faces, but they were not really walking yet.

A few days later, buoyed by a measure of success, they would let loose the support they had gripped so tightly, and high kneed and unsteady, precarious and tottering, they would take their first few unaided steps before tumbling down.

From an outsider's view, as far as walking goes? Pretty unimpressive.

From a coaching view? So much wrong—probably not even worth a coaching session. This toddler is not a player. Walking? Not in his future. Probably ought not to give up his day job.

Their movements were precarious and unbalanced, and it took only two or three steps before complete failure. So staccato were the motions, their “walking” looked nothing like the real thing. Recommendation: continue crawling.

But as parents? We cheered as if they had scored the winning touchdown, like they'd received the first-place math award, like they'd just landed on the moon. We had hope. We knew the next time would be a little better, and with enough next times, those kids would be walking. And when they could walk, they could go places—for the rest of their lives. There was enough potential in that first “all wrong” step that our joy seemed warranted.

Such a discrepancy. Such an enormous gap between what we saw that day and what we imagined could be possible. Such hope in a tiny, wobbly, unimpressive first step. But such a deep belief that, with encouragement, cheers, practice, and rest, our toddler would walk. There was little to no evidence. Just a tiny flicker of light. A possibility worth banking on.

Our oldest daughter, Laura, was thirteen months old when she took her first unaided steps. We were sitting on the floor in my in-laws' small kitchen. My mother-in-law, Kathy, was holding Laura up, facing me. I called to Laura and held out my hands. Kathy unfurled her fingers from Laura, and Laura took four Frankenstein-like steps before I scooped her up in my arms. You would have thought Laura had won the Nobel Peace Prize from the celebration that followed.

That night, after her bath, we snuggled Laura into her flannel jammies with the feet and sang to her. We rocked her in the rocking chair in the nursery and read her a book as she sipped the last bit of milk from her Tommee Tippee cup. Kissing the soft part of her neck, I laid Laura in her crib with her favorite blankie and whispered, “Good night, little walker.”

Later, before we went to bed, I gently opened the door to the nursery and stood over Laura's crib. She was fast asleep, her head turned to the side, a pink flush in her cheeks. The hair on the back of her neck was curled into ringlets, which often happened when she was warm. Her lips moved in a sucking motion, and her breathing was deep and even. As I looked at her, with the moonlight casting patterns on the sheets from the stencil-like effect of the lace curtains, I thought my heart would explode in my chest. There was so much love. A universe of love. Love—way more than could possibly be contained in my body—and yet there it was, deep inside, expanding and threatening to blow me apart. In that sacred quiet, the only sound was a baby and a mother breathing.

I placed my hand on Laura's tummy—firm enough to feel her, light enough not to wake her—and I prayed. A simple prayer, a short one. “May her faltering steps be strong; may she walk into her future with you, God.”

My hope in that prayer was that what we'd seen that day would grow. That the glimpse we'd had would abound into more. That she would walk—physically, metaphorically—into her future with God.

What gives us such hope in such a small thing? Or perhaps that's backward. Perhaps it is the nature of hope that it must start with small things. Or no things. Or in the dark. Otherwise, it wouldn't be hope.

So hope began. Even in the smallest of things, even in the cells that were growing inside me when I had my positive home pregnancy test with Laura. Even with that first step.

And as her life unfolded, the hope would burgeon and open, and horizons would expand into her future.



But what about as life comes toward its end? As the expanse narrows and what is left ahead shrinks, what then? This is the natural progression of divergence and convergence. . . .

Last week I sat at Joyce Brandle's bedside. She and her husband, Ed, have been longtime attenders of our church—more than forty years. Ed is an usher at our church, and nearly every Sunday he greets me with a gentle hug. He's been a deacon and a Marine. There is, I think, a connection. He and Joyce have been married for more than fifty years, and they live just a few blocks from us. Joyce is dying of bile duct cancer. She was diagnosed four months ago, and the doctors told them both that there was nothing they could do for her, that she had probably about a year to live.

So I stopped by. I brought a small glass jar with a few roses cut from our yard. I rang the doorbell, and Ed, moving slowly, answered. He was in the living room watching football while Joyce was in their bedroom resting.

I waited while Ed went to check on Joyce, and he returned to tell me she was awake and would welcome a visit. Their house reminded me of my grandmother's home back when I was a child. The decor and design were reminiscent of the fifties—not much had changed. It was comforting in that way memory can be.

I made my way down the hall and to the bedroom where

Joyce lay on top of the bedspread with a blanket over her thin body, her Persian cat curled up in the nook of her knees. Joyce was emerging from her nap, but her sky-blue eyes were sharp and clear. Her mouth was dry, and she fought with her lips as they caught on her teeth before she was able to greet me. She took a sip of water as I sat down, and her face lit up when she saw the small cluster of roses I placed at her bedside.

For the next half hour Joyce and I had a delightful conversation. She asked questions about my family, and I asked about hers. We talked about her health and her cat. “She knows something is wrong. She typically wouldn’t stay this close to me all day, but she won’t leave my side whether I’m sleeping or awake.”

She told me that hospice was coming once or twice a week, just to help with transferring from her bed to a chair and with taking a bath. Whenever it was, years ago, that little blue-eyed Joyce had taken her first faltering steps, she was coming quickly to the end of that ability. Her walking days were largely behind her now. Her world was narrow: the four walls of this bedroom, the view of the backyard through the sliding glass doors across from her bed. Even the outdoors, for the most part, was now beyond her.

“I’m not afraid,” she said.

Ed interrupted us a couple of times, offering something to eat or drink—the loving offerings of a devoted and bereft husband. The kindness was palpable.

“I’m not afraid.”

And for the next few minutes, her countenance and the

cadence of her words supported that bold statement. She talked about how grateful she was to know Jesus. Her world was narrowing, her steps gone. This world was becoming more and more dark and distant. And the light—it was before her. It was Jesus.

Those were rich minutes, with me mostly listening, trying to absorb. Then she asked about a family from our church whose sixteen-year-old son had just taken his own life. It had wrenched our community, and she had heard about it. I related the few details I knew about this unthinkable incident.

Then here's what Joyce said: "It won't be long until I am with God, maybe a few months. I think the first thing I'd like to do is to find Evan. And when I see him, I'm going to scold him. I cannot imagine how his parents will ever be the same again. But then, much longer than I scold him, I'm going to hold him. And I'm going to hold him and hold him and hold him. And I'm going to keep him close by until his parents see him again."

From the outside looking at Joyce, it seems like her light is narrowing and the dark is before her. But hearing what is coming from inside her? Maybe not. Maybe she is moving toward what looks to us like a thin stream of light about to be snuffed out, but in reality is an ever-widening band of light. And as she walks toward it, it is actually about to open up to her an eternity of nothing but light.

Dark Skies

I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

SARAH WILLIAMS

THE INTERNATIONAL DARK-SKY ASSOCIATION is a group dedicated to the preservation of our globe's night sky. It works to reduce light pollution, solely for the purpose of allowing us to gaze into the "extraordinary wonders of the nighttime sky." One of the many places set aside as a dark-sky region is Death Valley. Though Los Angeles and Death Valley are only a four-hour drive apart, the contrast is so remarkable you'd think there were two different skies.

In the city, with all the competing lights, you may be able to pick out only a handful of stars overhead. In Death Valley, it's another world. The sky is smudged with bands of silver-white; dazzling twinkles radiate from millions of miles

away. It is another sky, yet the same one. The dark is what allows you to see.

My first memory of the wonders that the dark sky holds is from when I was seven years old. It was the first summer of many that my mom and dad and I vacationed in the White Mountains of Arizona. Tucked against the New Mexico border, at an elevation of more than eight thousand feet, this area was dazzling. Green meadows between tall peaks, plunging river canyons, purple wildflowers, and German brown trout in the streams.

We stayed at the Sprucedale Guest Ranch, a family-owned “guest dude ranch.” Actually, it was a working cattle ranch, and in the summer they supplemented their income by opening their doors to guests. We stayed in handmade log cabins that ran electricity for two hours in the morning and a few more at night. Meals were in the ranch house—unbelievable homemade, fresh creations—and the daily activities were fishing, hiking, and horseback riding. The horseback riding included finding and driving in the cattle that were feeding at the higher elevations. A couple of times during the week, in the afternoons, we were in the corral, roping and branding the calves.

The first night we stayed there, we were sitting on the front porch of our cabin. As my eyes adjusted to the dark sky, I couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing. My dad, noticing the quizzical look on my face, said, “That's the Milky Way.”

For the next few minutes we alternated between awe-filled

silence and conversation as he explained to me the vast number of heavenly bodies in the sky that in LA had gone unseen.

He pointed out tiny dots of light that when connected (at least by the imagination) made up the outlines of mythological creatures the ancients had seen and named. He told me about the navigational abilities these stars and planets had given to the Polynesians, the Vikings, and sailors from many lands since. He also talked about our place in all of this vastness. Small but connected.

Stories, direction, place—all above my head, but largely unseen until it was dark. Very dark.

It took time for my eyes to adjust, to be able to see in the dark. When there is a low-light condition, the pupils automatically dilate in order to let in more light. It's like taking your first step into a dark movie theater and trying to find a seat. It's so dark you're not sure there even are seats. But just a minute or so later, with time and adjustment, you see what you could not see before.



When I was a little girl my parents split up. Not an uncommon story, you'd think, but this was in the early 1960s. I was, quite literally, the *only* kid in my elementary school whose parents were going through a divorce. I know, because occasionally I heard teachers whispering to one another as I walked down the hallways, "That's her; she's the one." There was no unkind tone—it was just such an anomaly.

I was in third grade, eight years old. Some of my strongest

and most painful memories from that time were the fights before they split. The yelling was awful, and I would alternate between trying to push my way between them to get them to stop and running to the den and turning the television volume up loud enough to drown out the noise. The noise terrified me because when it went on long enough, one of them would leave.

One parent would drive away in the car, and the other, probably exhausted from the ordeal, would collapse into bed. But that's not where I went. I crawled onto the kitchen counter and peered through the curtains, watching and waiting for the parent who had left to come back.

It's remarkable how vivid that experience is to this day. My recall, not always my strongest suit, is impeccable when it comes to those evenings. I can still feel the cold turquoise counter tiles on my shins. I can picture the fabric of the kitchen curtains with their teakettle design. The thick brass hooks on the curtains made a peculiar sound against the rod when I pushed them aside, searching for the familiar headlights that would mean my mom or dad was home.

When I saw the car pulling into our one-lane driveway, I would return the curtains to their closed position and run to my bed, pretending to be asleep and listening for the turn of the kitchen door. Once the parent who had driven away was back, I felt such a strong relief that sleep would overtake me.

Interestingly, my parents ended up reconciling a year later, and until the day my father died in 1990, they were together. But it took me years of counseling, talking through

things with friends, and wrestling with God to understand the full impact all of this had on me. There were long seasons, especially through high school and college, when I found it laughable that it had affected me at all. Perhaps those years of denial explain why it took so long before this issue bubbled to the surface and I was finally forced to look at it.

There's one other thing I remember from this time. An occasional, faint whisper. Not even a whisper, really—more a soul presence. Every once in a while, on that cold tile counter, along with the terror I felt, there was an accompanying presence—a sense that I was *not* as alone as it seemed. The small awareness that I was not on my own.



In Hebrew, the word *psalm* means “book of praise.” The problem is, once you open the book of Psalms, you realize that well over half of the chapters are psalms of *lament*. Hardly truth in advertising . . .

So the one book of the Bible that invites us into its pages by promising birds chirping and flowers blooming is filled with words like *despair*, *alone*, *wicked*, and *loathing*. Far more plentiful than the verses that remind us to rejoice and praise are those that admit to distance from and doubts about God.

Imagine if your responsive reading in church next Sunday were taken from Psalm 58:

Break the teeth in their mouths, O God. . . .

Let them vanish like water that flows away. . . .

May they be like a slug that melts away as it
moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.

Or Psalm 88:

I am set apart with the dead, . . .
whom you remember no more. . . .
You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths. . . .
I am confined and cannot escape;
my eyes are dim with grief. . . .
I cry to you for help, . . .
Why, LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me? . . .
Darkness is my closest friend.

All the voices speaking aloud, in unison. Hard to picture, isn't it? But these verses are the holy words of Scripture coming to us. The implication is clear: right alongside the psalms of praise—good news, triumph, and joy—are the harsh words of woundedness, fear, and despair. Perhaps they even imply that the way to praise is through lament, not by avoiding pain or pretending it doesn't hurt so bad.

In fact, before you read any further, go back to the two passages above and read them aloud. Read them slowly, deliberately, and with meaning.

Well? There are some seriously harsh sentiments in there.

It's raw, it's rude, it's childish—it's the Bible. As you read these passages aloud, can you see that there has been some time when these words were an honest commentary on your own life? Maybe that time is now.

Either way, the writers of the psalms are trying to tell us that it's all part of the journey. But what happens is that we don't like that message, so we plaster on a strained smile and talk about victory and peace, when neither is around for miles. The very fact that we *never* do responsive readings in our churches with these kinds of passages points to our denial of the hard stuff and our superficial comfort with frosting and quick, easy answers as a substitute for the rough edges of faith.

Someone once said that faith is not a personal possession until you have suffered. That person understood that the very nature of faith requires the grit and courage to be in the dark so you can eventually see in the dark. Then faith becomes faith.

To get to the perspective reflected in Psalm 58 and Psalm 88, there has to be some gut-wrenching pain. Betrayal. Woundedness. Fear. Terror. Anger. Fury. Jaw-dropping disappointment. Loss. Death. Separation.

A good friend of mine lost her child recently. Unspeakable, seismic sadness. When she called, I listened in stunned silence as she told me what had happened. My mind was racing, trying to comprehend the reality of it and thinking about getting a plane ticket as soon as I hung up the phone.

I had received the phone call just as I'd pulled up to our house, and I sat in my car long after we hung up, crying in

disbelief and pain for my friend. For the next few days, before I left for the funeral, I wondered, *Who else?*

As I walked through crowds at the store and went to meetings at work, I thought, *Who else near me has been through this kind of horror and buries it below the surface because no one wants to see this kind of pain up close?* Were there scores of people I was rubbing elbows with who were a part of this club that no one wanted to join, but I just couldn't see it?

I remember when one of my friends had a miscarriage, she was amazed by the women who came out of the woodwork with "me too." She'd had no idea. One of the rules of membership was silence until another member was recognized.

At the funeral, I watched my friend's face. It was taut and worn, somewhere between aging and lost. I had known her face since we were in junior high school. We had been children together ourselves. Now she had lost hers. Lost. And she looked like a toddler who realized for the first time that it was possible to lose your favorite toy or even break it, and no one—no one—could find it or fix it. Terror and unspeakable sadness.



I wish there were another answer. Sometimes you just have to sit and stay in the darkness. Sit and stay when every cell in your body is telling you to move and medicate. Sit and stay, wait. Let the dark sky envelope you, because if you move too quickly, your eyes will never adjust, and if they never adjust, they will never see. At least they'll never see what they are supposed to see.

Sit and stay and wait. Let the talking of friends subside, let the silence deafen, let the pain overwhelm, and wait. If you don't, you will miss it. You will not hear the whisper or see the flicker. You will be moving and unable to receive what you need most.

There is a new reality that takes time to see. Not exactly a new reality, but a more real one that only comes into focus in silence. A reality that is best seen through eyes filled with tears. A seemingly dark sky, which after a bit of time reveals the magnificent Milky Way.

In the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, a period of darkness was beginning. "This is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53). And between that moment and the morning of the Resurrection, there was deep darkness. A darkness during which Jesus kept mostly still. There was no fight. He gave Herod "no answer" (Luke 23:9). While Peter sprang into action, chopping off an ear and vehemently denying he knew Jesus, Jesus was still. He went where he was led. He knew the darkness had started, and he let it envelop him. Perhaps because he knew that *through* this darkness was the only way *to* the light.