



**“DIVINITY AND DARKNESS”**  
**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 29; ROMANS 8: 12-17**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**May 27, 2018**

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**Romans 8:12-17**

8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--

8:13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

8:14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

8:15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

8:16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

8:17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

The Word of the LORD

**Thanks be to God**

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3 lbs a piece. That’s all each puppy weighed. We hadn’t planned on having two little puppies, but the living conditions I found them in were cruel and I did what I had to do—I rescued the puppies from that awful situation and called John from 6 hours away from home to tell him we now had two puppies and then turned my phone off for the rest of the trip to let him get used to the idea.

By the time I got home that night, John couldn’t help but see how adorable those little pups were—and all was well in the Mount Shoop house!

Until about 4am when they started to whimper to go outside to go to the bathroom. John took them out (what a good sport, right!) but he didn’t realize he needed to stay out there with them. He came back upstairs. “Where are the puppies?” I said. “Outside!” He said.

“You can’t just leave them out there—they are too little!”

I rushed down stairs and opened the door just in time to see a huge owl, with talons out, coming straight for the puppies. I scooped them up and ducked for cover not a second too soon. The owl floated up and took his perch in a tree right by our deck—and spoke sternly to me about taking his breakfast. Hoo hoo hoo-hoo, hoo hoo hoo-hoo (who cooks for you? who cooks for you?)

Would an owl really eat a puppy? I called the raptor center that day and asked. “Anything under 5 lbs, is a good meal for an owl. I’d watch your puppies closely until they are about 8 lbs or so.”

Anything that would eat a puppy would be pretty easy for me to feel hostile toward. But, coming that close to that owl was a humbling moment—he was just doing what owls do—and for him it was about survival, maybe survival of his mate and his owlets for all I knew. Even though he tried to eat my new little puppies, I felt a reverence for that owl—he was a powerful being.

Owls are intricately built to be what owls were created to be—efficient and accurate hunters of rodents and other prey.

The anatomy of an owl is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Their eyes are huge and are not balls like ours, but tubes that cannot move in their sockets. They function like binoculars and are able to see in dim light or in total darkness.

Some owls can hear a mouse’s squeak half a mile away or even an animal underground. Their ears are asymmetrical and sound is directed by the disc like position of their facial feathers. Owls can know the precise location of their prey by the barely detectable time difference it takes a sound to get to one ear and to the other.

Owls can move their necks 270 degrees around and tilt their heads 180 degrees back. Owl’s wings have feather variations that make their flight perfectly silent.

Owls are made to thrive in the dark. Owls can be who they were made to be and know how to work in the dark.

What would the world be like if we humans could be who God made us to be and know how to work in the dark?

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The Apostle Paul was not afraid of the dark.

Paul’s own journey taught him to go into his shadows to tell the truth about how much he needed God.

It was Paul's time in total darkness, struck blind on the road to Damascus, that transformed him from someone filled with hate and hostility toward followers of Jesus to one who was willing to risk his life to share Christ's good news.

I was taught in seminary to be wary of Paul, to encounter his dualistic language with suspicion. And it is true that Paul's dualistic language (body vs. spirit) has been appropriated in the Christian tradition to teach human beings to hate our physical bodies.

But I believe God calls us to engage the parts of scripture that we wish were not there. Exploring the Word with the Spirit's help and exploring our own reactions and assumptions about the Word are how we cultivate a healthy relationship with God's mystery.

With the Spirit's help, I read Paul's words here not just as a product of a culture in which dualism helped the world make sense, but I also read this passage as an invitation to all Christ followers—across time and culture. Paul was writing to people living at the center of political, economic, and military power and telling them they could be who God made them to be in this midst of a self-destructive, idolatrous, and dangerous world.

Paul was inviting the church in Rome to stay engaged in a complicated world at the same time they stay clear on who they are, adopted children of God.

Because of their adoption, Jesus followers are freed from the bondage of sin to engage the world faithfully—not to escape the world or reject the world, but to have the eyes to see the world clearly and to serve God in the world faithfully.

Paul is proclaiming that our created nature, our relationship to our bodies and our relationships to the world are now equipped to work in the dark, to live proper to our nature in a world where it can be hard to see truth, hard to hear truth, and hard to trust our surroundings.

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This past Tuesday we started our Session meeting with Trinity Trivia Night. Ask any Elder to fill you in on all the fun Trinitarian facts they learned.

The first question was: name the book of the Bible where the word Trinity shows up. Anybody know the answer? Nowhere!

The word Trinity never shows up the Bible. Theophilus of Antioch first used the Greek word, *triad* of Godhead, in 180AD.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century to try and create a broad coalition of Christians by coming to some agreement about the

Trinity. Questions about the nature of the Trinity, how the three persons of God were related to each other, how one God can be three, how this three-ness of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) worked had become serious points of conflict among teachers of Christianity. There was no clear church hierarchy in place yet; and there was no precedent for the concept of orthodoxy that carried any teeth yet either.

While Constantine wanted to find agreement to build a broad coalition of Christians to strengthen his reign, Bishop Athanasius, who was referred to by many as “gangster,” was about besting his rival, Arius, and increasing his political traction.

Athanasius won out and Arius was banished—he was a beloved teacher who was known for having women leaders in his circles of learning. That practice also fast became outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.

While the Trinitarian formula that emerged from these politicized and less than laudable conditions has a lot of theological richness to it, we have to wonder how different the church would be today if, at that turning point in our development, those with power had decided to be inclusive of differing theological perspectives instead of generating the practices of labeling beliefs as orthodox or heretical.

The last question at Trivia night was not trivial at all. It was “what is important to you about the Trinity?”

None of the answers we shared had anything to do with doctrine. They had everything to do with relationship.

The Trinity is about divinity and darkness—the Holy Mystery of a powerful love willing itself into every crack and crevice, every shadow and seed of human existence.

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We tend to hear the word darkness as synonymous with bad. We have a bias that has taught us to think of light as good and darkness as bad.

Everything needs darkness to grow:

- seeds
- cells
- you gestated in the darkness of a womb

And mystery needs darkness to grow.

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Trinity is about connection, vitality, relationship—not dogma, not orthodoxy, not political one-ups-man-ship.

It should have never come down to lines being drawn and faithful believers who were unafraid to wonder being banished.

God, the three in one, is about the mystery of God with us and beyond us, of sacred brushes with God's intimacy and immensity.

The Trinity draws us in close to Holy Mystery, and it ignites a profound humility and wonder.

Pseudo Dionysius, is another of our tradition's ancient fathers. He is the father of what's called negative theology. Now "negative theology" sounds bad, deficient, well negative! But negative or apophatic theology is mystical theology and it asserts that we can only begin to abide in God's mysterious nature through the practice of cognitive negation.

Pseudo-Dionysius understood himself as an interpreter of Christianity in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but through his interpretation he actually gave birth to a new way of encountering God's mystery. God mystery was something that was fast becoming at the time a sword in the hands of the adolescent hierarchies of the church.

That ecclesial hierarchy was showing itself to be more about flexing its muscle by defining and enforcing orthodoxy, than about supporting and encouraging all those who loved and sought after God.

This ancient one, Pseudo Dionysius, in the midst of all that political wrangling, tasted the mystical harmonies of divine love and wrote his theology as poetry, a poem of negation and elation, of letting go and coming closer.

O Trinity

beyond essence and  
beyond divinity and  
beyond goodness  
guide of Christians in divine wisdom,  
direct us towards mysticism's heights  
beyond unknowing  
beyond light  
beyond limit,  
there where the  
unmixed and  
unfettered and  
unchangeable  
mysteries of theology  
in the dazzling dark of the welcoming silence  
lie hidden, in the intensity of their darkness  
all brilliance outshining,  
our intellects, blinded

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released from all,  
aloft to the flashing forth,  
beyond all being, of the divine dark.<sup>1</sup>

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Not long after that owl scolded me for stopping him from getting my two puppies; my extended family went on a trip in the mountains of Tennessee. One of the activities we could join in on was a walk at night to listen for the calls of owls. My dad and I decided to go.

It was a dark night—hardly any moon to speak of. I could barely see my dad just a few inches from me. The guide took us along the wood perimeter of an open field and told us to be patient and listen.

After a while we heard it.

hoo hoo hoo-hoo (who cooks for you). The guide told us that was a barred owl—and I learned something about the owl that must have lived near my own back yard in Charlotte—I would never forget the sound of his message to me when I stopped him from getting my puppies for breakfast.

After some more silence we began to hear a call and response between two other owls.

low hoo-hoo-hoo hoo hoo. The guide told us those were Great Horned owls, coordinating efforts with each other.

These animals were so tuned in to their surroundings. And I was in my 20s and just learning to identify their voices. How little I really know about this planet I call home.

It was a moment of wonder, a moment of humility, a moment of connection with the mysteries of this life.

Mysteries need darkness to grow. You and me, all people of faith, are called into the life-giving dark of mystery, into the bewildering dark of a world seemingly hell-bent on its own destruction, into the ambiguous dark of our shadows and the unknowns that face us every day, and into the shimmering dark of a God we will never fully know or understand, a God who holds us in the dark and will never let us go.

The Trinity is a deep breath. The Trinity is letting go of our thoughts. It is about having the courage to spend some time in the dark—trusting that something more, the impossible to grasp—believing there is a source of love so powerful, so wise, so

alive with love, that you and me can actually learn how to be who we were made to be in this world, God's children who know how to work in the dark.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, in Harvey Egan, ed., *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 96-97.