Advent Book Study Weekly Guide

Learning to Walk in the Dark

Week One — Monday, November 30

Introduction: Treasures of Darkness • Ch. 1: Who's Afraid of the Dark?

Where we are

Taylor opens with a line from Isaiah about treasures hidden in darkness, and then tells us plainly what she is after. She has grown uneasy with a faith that puts God entirely on the side of light. She calls that faith "full solar" — a spirituality of perpetual noon, where blessing looks like brightness and doubt looks like failure. Against it she sets a lunar faith: one that waxes and wanes without apology. Then she does something braver than naming the problem. She goes outside, lies down in her own dark yard, and waits to see what is actually there. This week we begin where she begins — with what we were taught to be afraid of, and with who taught us.

Scripture to read alongside

- Isaiah 45:3 — the treasures of darkness (the book's own epigraph)
- Genesis 1:1–5 — God creates in the dark, and names it night, not evil
- Psalm 139:11–12 — even the darkness is not dark to God
- Mark 13:32–37 — keep awake, for you do not know when the master comes

For our conversation

1. What were you taught about the dark as a child — first by your family, and then, separately, by the church? Where did those two lessons agree, and where did they not?
2. Taylor sets a solar faith against a lunar one. Which of the two were you handed? And which have you passed on — to your children, your students, your friends?
3. She is candid about the marks of her own spiritual darkness: the fear of not knowing, the familiarity of God's absence, impatience with easy comfort. Which item on her list is also yours?
4. Scripture opens with God working in the dark and calling it good. So where did we learn to read darkness as the enemy, if not from the first page of our own book?
5. Taylor notices how thoroughly our language makes "dark" a synonym for everything bad. Where do you hear that in our hymns, our prayers, our liturgies? What does that habit cost — and who pays for it?

6. Advent asks us to wait in the dark for four weeks. Be honest with the group: do you want to? What would you rather be doing?

A practice for the week

One evening this week, turn off every light in a single room and sit there for ten minutes. No phone, no screen, no candle. Notice what your body does, what your mind reaches for, and how long it takes before something other than fear arrives. Bring one sentence about it back to the group.

Week Two — Monday, December 7

Ch. 2: The Fear of the Lord • Ch. 3: Hampered by Brilliance • Ch. 4: The Dark Emotions

Where we are

These three chapters make one argument in three different keys. First: the God of scripture is nowhere near as afraid of the dark as we are. This God shows up in thick cloud, in deep and terrifying sleep, on a mountain nobody can see. Second: our floodlit world has cost us something physical. We have lost the night sky, and with it the practiced patience it takes for human eyes to adjust. Third: that same impatience runs straight through our emotional lives. Taylor takes up Miriam Greenspan's work on grief, fear, and despair and asks what we forfeit by treating sorrow as a malfunction to be corrected rather than a teacher to be met. The through-line is simple and uncomfortable — the light we manufacture ourselves tends to blind us.

Scripture to read alongside

- Exodus 20:21 — Moses enters the thick darkness where God is
- 1 Kings 8:12 — the Lord has said he would dwell in thick darkness
- Genesis 15:12–17 — a deep sleep, a dreadful darkness, and a covenant
- Psalm 130 — waiting for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning

For our conversation

1. “Fear of the Lord” has been softened in most of our churches into something like good manners. What do we lose when awe becomes politeness?
2. God meets Moses in thick darkness and Abram in a dread-filled sleep. Why do we so rarely preach these texts in Advent, when the season seems made for them?

3. Taylor argues that too much light actively keeps us from seeing. Where in your life is there too much light — too much information, too much reassurance, too much noise?
4. Night vision takes a good twenty minutes to arrive, and a single flashlight undoes all of it. What is the spiritual equivalent? What keeps flipping your lights back on just as your eyes begin to adjust?
5. The claim here is that grief, fear, and despair have something to teach us that joy cannot. Do you believe that? What has sorrow taught you that nothing else could have?

We are good at comforting people. Are we good at sitting with them? What is the difference — and which of the two did you most need the last time your own lights went out?

A practice for the week

Go outside after dark one night without a flashlight and without the porch light on. Stay twenty minutes — long enough for your eyes to actually adjust. Resist the urge to check your phone, which will undo it instantly. Notice what becomes visible that was not visible when you walked out.

Week Three — Monday, December 14

Ch. 5: The Eyes of the Blind • Ch. 6: Entering the Stone • Ch. 7: The Dark Night of the Soul

Where we are

This is the heart of the book, and the hardest of our four weeks. Taylor introduces us to Jacques Lusseyran, blinded at eight years old, who discovered a light that did not come from outside him and who went on to lead a resistance network under the Nazis. She crawls into a West Virginia cave and loses her nerve in the dark. And she takes up John of the Cross, Gerald May, and the letters of Mother Teresa, who carried decades of felt divine absence and told almost no one. What holds these three chapters together is a single claim: the dark night is not punishment, and it is not depression. It is subtraction — God removing what we had been using in place of God. In a season built around a birth that happened at night, in a borrowed room, with almost no witnesses, this one lands close to the bone.

Scripture to read alongside

- John 9:1–7, 39–41 — who is blind, and who only thinks they can see

- Luke 2:8–14 — shepherds keeping watch by night, and the news arriving there first
- John 20:1 — while it was still dark, Mary comes to the tomb
- Psalm 88 — the one psalm that ends in darkness and does not resolve

For our conversation

1. Lusseyran said he lost his sight and found a light that was not outside of him. What would it take for you to trust a light you could not point to?
2. Taylor is honest that using "blindness" as a metaphor for ignorance is an insult to people who are actually blind. How should that change the way we read John 9 — or the way we pray?
3. Deep in the cave, she panics. When were you last that frightened? What did you do with the fear, and did anyone else know about it?
4. The two events this faith rests on — the birth at Bethlehem and the empty tomb — both happened in the dark, unwitnessed. Why do you think God keeps working the night shift?
5. John of the Cross calls the dark night a gift. Mother Teresa kept hers hidden for forty years. What does it say about the Church that she felt she had to?
6. Taylor draws a careful line between the dark night of the soul and clinical depression. Why does that line matter so much pastorally? Where have you seen it blurred, and what happened?

A practice for the week

Ask one person who has walked through a genuinely dark season what helped them — and what did not. Listen all the way to the end without offering to fix anything. That restraint is the practice.

Week Four — Monday, December 21 · The Longest Night

Ch. 8: Working with Darkness • Ch. 9: Our Lady of the Underground • Epilogue: Blessing the Day

Where we are

We close on the solstice, with the chapters in which Taylor stops studying darkness and starts practicing it. She descends into the crypt beneath Chartres Cathedral to sit with Our Lady of the Underground — a Black Madonna in the dark, underneath one of the brightest buildings in Christendom — and discovers that Our Lady asks nothing whatsoever of her. The book ends not with a conclusion but with a blessing. We will do the same. Tonight the

dark is as long as it gets, and three days from now we will light the candles anyway. That is the whole shape of this faith, and we will have spent four weeks learning how to stand in it.

Scripture to read alongside

- Genesis 32:22–31 — Jacob wrestles until daybreak and will not let go without a blessing
- Luke 1:78–79 — the dawn from on high breaking upon those who sit in darkness
- Isaiah 9:2 — those who walked in darkness have seen a great light
- Luke 1:26–38 — a young woman says yes to something she cannot yet see

For our conversation

1. The arc of this book follows the phases of the moon. Where are you in that cycle right now — waxing, full, waning, or new?
2. Our Lady of the Underground wants nothing from Taylor. When did you last sit with God and feel no demand at all? Was that a relief, or a provocation?
3. Four weeks ago we asked what you were taught to fear. Has anything moved? Be specific.
4. Jacob holds on until daybreak, refuses to let go without a blessing, and limps away with a new name. What have you been holding onto until the dawn? What has it cost you?
5. Taylor ends with a blessing instead of an answer. What would you bless tonight, on the longest night, that you could not have blessed back in November?
6. On Thursday we will light the candles and sing about light coming into the world. After these four weeks, how will you sing it differently?

A practice for the longest night

Keep one hour of tonight without electric light. Then write your own blessing for the dark — four lines will do. Bring it to Christmas Eve in your pocket, and read it to yourself before the candles are lit.