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Arise and Shine!
Genesis 1 and John 1

In 2014 I was called to be the pastor of a church in the small midwestern town of Grinnell, Iowa. It was a lovely community of 10,000 residents with a magnificent college by the same name. Grinnell is a very desirable but underestimated place to live and work. Several corporations are headquartered there. The town has a great high school and a regional hospital, which in the healthcare hellscape of rural America should say a lot about the community. But the first few times I visited Grinnell I couldn't see any of these positive qualities. I was so concerned about myself and my future that I had blinders on. It was a perfect job for me to become the pastor of a historic congregation in a progressive academic community. But I felt very lost in my first few years out of graduate school. I felt very lonely so far away from my family and the friends who had accompanied me through my education. And truth be told I wasn't sure what kind of commitment I felt comfortable making in a future I couldn't see. What loomed largest for me was the fear and uncertainty of taking steps forward.

So when I looked at Grinnell, all I could see was a gritty, dusty, prairie town. It didn't help that I had recently viewed several films that colored my perception of the place. Nobody making a home in Iowa or Minnesota needs the film *Fargo*, for instance, haunting them with desolating images of the Great White North. Will I be driven so mad by the frigid winters as these characters? How could I forget the awful woodchipper scene in the end? But even *Fargo* wasn't nearly so disillusioning as another film I'd recently seen, *Nebraska*. Nominated for an oscar in 2013, it's about the deception of an old man lured from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska to collect the winnings of a fraudulent sweepstakes prize. Filmed in black and white, with camera shots of dilapidated homes and wide, empty streets in desolate towns, *Nebraska* is easily the most depressing film I'd ever seen. When I got to Grinnell, those caricatured images of midwestern places were all I could see in my mind's eye. And I was overwhelmed with a feeling of despair. What am I doing with my life? How did I wind up here?

What gave those films so much power over me? Surely it had to do with the vexations that came at a big turning point in my life. It also had to do with how I saw the landscape and how the landscape was framed for me, yes, in the middle of the winter. What I am saying is not a fair portrait of a very vibrant community where I lived for four very fulfilling years. That's actually my point. What I could see on my first visits to Grinnell was just a partial truth - and it scared me. It was gray; it was cold. The wind blew hard and all the people were indoors. How could I be stepping forward into such ... bleakness?

There is the unusual word choice in Wilda Gafney's translation. It's use in Genesis and the Gospel of John standing like two pillars holding a bridge from one end of the Bible to the other. What Gafney translates as bleakness we are more accustomed to hearing as darkness.

NRSV: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Gafney: When beginning, he, God, created the heavens and the earth, the earth was shapeless and formless and bleakness covered the face of the deep...In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...the light shines in the bleakness and the bleakness did not overtake it.

What a subtle change in language that makes a great difference in spiritual meaning. What I saw, and what caused me so much fear and uncertainty, was not darkness but bleakness. This word choice has the beneficial consequence of deracializing our associations of light and darkness. The creation story of Genesis has too often been an accomplice to a culture that teaches us to associate light with good and dark with bad. Of course God operates high above, far beyond and long before our constructions of race.

But what about the children, we might wonder, who are understandably afraid of the dark? The dark is scary - but most of us grow at some point to find some measure of peace and comfort in the dark. We actually need the darkness, without which we would be unable to sleep. It's not the darkness that keeps us up at night; it's the bleakness, which knows neither daylight nor nighttime - both rousing us from our sleep and afflicting us in the middle of the day. It's in the worries that tighten our chests. It's in our ruminative thoughts that possess our minds. It's in the despair and the sadness that weigh on us and make our bodies feel heavy. It's in the grief that makes us wonder if we can go another day. It is the feeling that there is no future. It is the despair that pleads there is no hope. So to say that the world was dark before God knew it is not as precise as we may wish to be. The world outside of God's relationship with it is not dark. It's bleak. Who would want to live in such a world?

But it's not just our inner demons that Gafney invokes with the bleakness; she's talking about the forces outside and around us too, everything that is not living in alignment with the purposes of God. The bleakness holds all the causes of despair: sin corrupting our life together, evil muscling its way to power, death taking away fullness of life. So the first chapter of Genesis introduces us to the world before it was in relationship with God: formless and void, we are told, empty of life. We do not know what God did at the beginning of time, or exactly how God did it. What we do know is that when the world came into relationship with God the bleakness was driven away.

And that brings us to the other arresting word choice in Gafney's translation. Where where we are accustomed to reading "the light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it," she uses a slightly more active verb for the tension between the world that God relates to and the world that has no relationship with God. "The light shined in the bleakness," she writes, "and the bleakness did not overtake it." It's a small change - overcome, to overtake.

But it more accurately captures my own relationship with the bleakness - a binary struggle between light and the absence of life. Of course we are living in the midst of such a struggle today. Political forces hostile to truth and democratic order. Illness creating barriers between us and taking life from our bodies and our communities. It sure feels on many days that the bleakness is encroaching on us, rhythmically advancing like the waters eroding our seawalls. Our hope is in the promise of John's gospel: the bleakness did not overtake it.

I really came to love the community of Grinnell, Iowa. I even grew to love the harsh winter. But this time of year there was especially hard not because of the cold so much as because of the gray sky and the shortened days. Seasonal depression was not uncommon there, even more so at the higher latitudes north in Minnesota. The bleakness was so threatening this time of year that my best friend in Grinnell, who worked at the college, would fly off to Jamaica or some other Caribbean destination while classes were out of session. And truth be told I think that's why there are so many snowbirds in the midwest - not just because they desire the warmth of Phoenix, Arizona or Naples, Florida, but because they need to see the light of the sun.

The Gospel of John holds this binary for us to consider - the struggle between the light and the dark, or more accurately between the light of Jesus Christ and the bleakness that would occupy our world without that light. It's not just that the light drives out the darkness, but that the light animates us, elevates us, and propels us in hope. This is what we celebrate on Epiphany. God's relationship with all of creation; a light shining for all to see; triumphant over evil; victorious in the bleakness. The relationship of God with us, giving us life and animating our life together.

Arise! Shine, for your light has come. And the glory of God is upon you.

Amen.