

## THE TREASURE OF DARKNESS

Isaiah 45:1-7 / Luke 24:44-53

A few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting the *British Museum* in London. There was so much to see, I could have camped out there for weeks. Having been a classics major, I was very interested in the exhibits from antiquity. One small object, a cylinder made from clay, fascinated me in particular. It was inscribed in cuneiform Akkadian (an ancient pre-Persian language which I don't read) and signed by King Cyrus, the emperor of the first Persian empire. The very same Cyrus whom the prophet Isaiah pronounced as God's "messiah," God's anointed. The very same Cyrus who ended the Israelite's exile in Babylon and gave the order to have the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt.

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus: "I will give you the treasures of darkness, and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, who calls you by your name," the prophet tells the king on God's behalf. I always wondered how the mighty King Cyrus received these cryptic words and what he did with this peculiar proclamation. I am sure the battle-tested emperor had no trouble with God's promise "to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their robes, to open doors before

him— and the gates shall not be closed: I will go before you and level the mountains; I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron.” That’s something a general of a powerful army can easily understand. I am sure Volodymyr Zelensky wouldn’t have any trouble if God’s angel would make such a promise to the Ukrainians right now. But treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places? What did King Cyrus do with that? What are we to make of that?

The late great Mary Oliver wrote a short poem called *The Uses of Sorrow*. It goes like this:

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me

A box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand

That this, too, was a gift.

Did King Cyrus ever understand that God gave him the “treasures of darkness” because God loved him, even though he was not an Israelite?

And if he understood, how long did it take him to arrive at this conclusion?

A treasure, or a box of darkness, is a strange “gift” indeed, if you want to call it that. There is so much darkness in our world today—war; violence, both international and domestic; inequality; lies on a grand scale; hate and persecution; poverty; disease, and that’s just for starters. I am having a hard time accepting these “boxes of darkness” as treasures, as gifts. I am having a hard time seeing God’s hand in any of this. And I am convinced the Israelites were in a similar situation. The darkness of exile had surrounded them for a long time, and now a foreign ruler, not one of their own, was supposed to save them?

Yet God continues to lay it out for Cyrus, for the Israelites, and for us: “I am the LORD and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make weal and create woe. I the LORD do all these things.”

As I ponder my own, as we ponder our “boxes of darkness,” I wonder how long it will take me, how long it will take us, to become clear that each of them may be a gift. How long to acknowledge, as hard as it may be, that it is God who does all these things? This predicament makes me very uncomfortable because I like my dilemmas resolved and tied up neatly with a bow.

The disciples in Luke's gospel, aren't fairing any better than the Israelites and us. They had just been handed a "box of darkness" in Jesus's crucifixion. They *thought* they had unpacked it when the resurrected Christ joined them. They were exuberant, praising God for the great love God demonstrated in vanquishing death. But then, this happened: "While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." The divine blessing, bestowed upon them by none other than Jesus himself, was carried within yet another "treasure of darkness." While he was blessing them, he disappeared, never to be seen again. The very act of divine favor carried within it a mysterious part which remained hidden from the disciples, and will remain hidden from us. Treasure of darkness. Riches hidden in secret places.

The reaction of the disciples to what we call "Jesus's ascension" was just as strange as the gift of darkness itself: "And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God," the text tells us.

Worship and joy, continually blessing God in response to the gifts of darkness bestowed upon us by God, a God who is and always will be beyond our comprehension. Perhaps this is the only way for us to accept these strangely mysterious divine "gifts."

In listening to the prophet Isaiah and to the writer of Luke's gospel, maybe Mary Oliver's poem could be rewritten saying something like this:

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

The God who loves us

has given us treasures of darkness

And in God's mercy and grace

God waits for us to understand

that darkness is never dark to God,

that darkness, too, can—

sometimes—

be the bearer of divine love.

Glory, honor, praise, and thanksgiving be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen.

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