

Did I ever tell y'all about the time I encountered pure evil in the middle of the night? I'd been tucked in and was lying cozy in my bed waiting for sleep to come when, there, in the darkest corner of the room, a monster lurked. It was big and hulking but kinda short. Maybe it was crouched down ready to spring the moment I closed my eyes. It menaced from that corner, and I swear it moved, taunting me with the sway of its clawed arm. I was so scared, I didn't sleep until the sun came up. Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I didn't get up to turn on a light or call out for help. Obvious solutions, but I just knew that if I got up or hollered, the beast'd be on me in a flash, and that would be my dreadful end. So I lay there afraid and paralyzed and my little eight year old brain decided when the next day came, if I survived the night, I needed to get my affairs in order and say my goodbyes, for surely this was no one-night monster. But, when the sun came up, the monster disappeared, replaced by a chair piled high with backpack, soccer ball, and lots of clothes, including a long sleeve that swayed in the breeze of the ceiling fan. There was no monster, just some tidying up needed doing.

Now, to my credit, we are a species that isn't entirely meant for the dark. I mean, we can handle some darkness, but we don't have the eyes or ears of the critters that thrive at night. We stub our toes, hear scary things, have our hair stand on end. Even our brains tumble around worst case scenarios with home intruders or ghosts or legos left on the floor. We can survive in the dark, but we don't thrive there. And some of our oldest stories play with that biology. Like, where I grew up, if you see an owl, whatever you do, don't look it in the eye; that's how it takes your soul. Now, I've had the beautiful misfortune of making eye contact with a barred owl. It was gorgeous, but also the impossible turn of its head that locked my eyes in place sucked the air from my lungs. Far as I know, I've still got a soul, but point taken. There's a lot of beauty in the darkness, a whole entire half of creation that God said was good. There's phases of the moon, cactus flowers gracing a single night and no more, fascinating critters emerging only after the sun goes down. Beneath the earth, fungi connect ancient trees to struggling saplings, roots grow deep in search of unseen reservoirs, more critters live and die. The deepest parts of the ocean contain ancient tales of beauty, secrets we've yet to decipher, and alien life so brilliant that I give thanks for the advantage of opposable thumbs.

Do y'all know about the blobfish? It's maybe the saddest unofficial beauty pageant in the animal kingdom. The blobfish gets its name from its goopy, pink, well, blobby appearance on fishermen's decks. The tragedy for the poor blobfish is that it dies, and then we judge its appearance and either laugh at or pity the ugly thing. Problem is, it's not just a fish out of water. It's a fish out of very deep water. The blobfish evolved a body capable of withstanding the immense pressure of the deepest seas, and when we pull it from those depths to our world, it's just not built for this. It's a perfectly normal looking fish in its own habitat, and then we make fun of it for looking so weird in ours.

The darkness is fascinating. And it draws us. A cave entrance stumbled upon in the woods sends competing signals through our lizard brains. Do NOT go in there. What if there's bears? And also, I kinda want to go in there, 'cause what if there's bears? Caves also hold gorgeous formations formed over millennia, secret water passages, sometimes even arrowheads and scorch marks from long-abandoned campfires.

Did y'all ever watch the show Mythbusters? Oh, it was fantastic. People would send in myths they'd heard about and the hosts tested 'em to see if they were real. They had this one episode where the myth they tested was about why pirates wore eyepatches. Maybe your first assumption involves a nasty battle scar or an accident with a hook? Well, the myth to test goes like this: the "real" reason pirates wore eyepatches was to keep one eye always adjusted to the light and one sort of in reserve, always adjusted to dark. This was necessary, the theory goes, because they'd need to rush from above deck to below deck, and in the heat of

battle, the moments it took to wait for your eyes to adjust could've been fatal. So, keep a patch on one eye, rush downstairs, and switch the patch to the other eye. Now, we can't know for certain if this is the actual reason, but after several tests rushing back and forth from light to dark, and a whole lot of patch switching, they determined it's at least plausible.

Pirates notwithstanding, it seems these days we've gotta live with one eye primed for darkness, even if we don't particularly want to. Our eyes play tricks on us, turning laundry into monsters and reminding us that we're interlopers where light ceases. Now, I'm a fan of true dark, but I also know we've associated literal dark with something else altogether. Maybe it's some evolutionary switch deep in the folds of our brains that made the connection between sensory limitations and actual evil. But however we got here, when we talk about the dark, we need to remember that while it can hold beauty, it also holds deep and dangerous reality. And in that place, it's far too easy to mistake one thing for another, a lie for the truth, hatred for love, chicanery for charisma. And sometimes, intellectually we know the difference, but we get so scared we just can't make ourselves reclaim reality. Maybe we're afraid of making the change, or maybe we're afraid of what the light'll reveal.

God knows, as Jesus puts it, we've got enough people loving darkness instead of light. I do think we're getting better at keeping one eye adjusted to darkness, ready to decipher what's true versus what's just a pile of clothes. It's tiring, but it's unfortunately necessary. But there's also plenty of folks that refuse to see the truth when the lights come on. They're wearing two eye patches at the same time, always ready to navigate the dark but never prepared for light. There's even a desire to cling to that distorted truth in dark corners. Ya know, adjusting your eyes to dark only requires time, but adjusting to sudden light is painful. It's easier to squint your eyes shut and stay in the darkness than it is to endure that change. But my God do we need that change. All that to say, our views on all sorts of things have us teetering in the shadows. It's a hard place to be.

Our world is changing and it sometimes seems the light just can't keep up. It's scarier in the dark, but there's something almost comforting in that fear. It's familiar. It justifies pulling the covers up over my head. It justifies calcifying my place there. It justifies leaving the lights off because I'm less afraid of the dark than of what I'll see when the lights come on. Ultimately, it's like I'm afraid of being wrong. I'm afraid of the truth putting me in my place. I'm afraid the truth revealed will legitimize my enemies. I'm afraid that even when the truth comes to light, where I see horror revealed, another'll see exactly what they hoped to find, a monster ready to do their bidding. As Paul would say, "Let the reader understand."

This is the danger of darkness. It's so appealing and so fascinating, even the fear of it draws us in. And the deeper we go into that cave, the harder it is to turn back. And the darkness begins to weigh on us. Remember the unfairly named blobfish I told you about? Remember how the shift from its habitat to ours distorted it so much? I'm certain we are not immune to the same shift. Take us out of the light and drop us in the dark, and we distort, too, crushed by the pressure of things beyond our control.

Now, I'm not arguing that we should abandon darkness entirely in favor of light. We'll miss extraordinary beauty leaving half of creation to the secrets of the dark. And the light is dangerous, too. Think what happens when you stare too long at the sun. Maybe we do need to keep one eye adjusted, thriving in the clarity of light but always prepared for the dark. It may save us. And in that, hard as it is these days, in that I have hope. Darkness cannot last forever. Light always comes, and when it does, the truth is unavoidable no matter how hard ya squint. My hope is not that light wins. My hope is that light and dark balance. Lent is a dark period, but on the other side waits Easter. And to get there, we go through all sorts of darkness first. The arrest at Gethsemane, the trial, Christ on the cross, the tomb, the underworld, the grave itself...all dark times in dark places. But in those dark places the dawn of new life gestates, and come one Sunday in Spring, light delivers. And that, that balance, that is my hope.