

To Bless the Longest Night

A Liturgy for the Winter Solstice

December 21st, 2018



Longest Night © Jan Richardson

The winter solstice marks the single longest night in the calendar year and the commencement of the winter season in the northern hemisphere. We acknowledge the rhythms of our natural world as an invitation in to reflection upon not only the recreation we ourselves are continuously experiencing, but also the mystery and power of our God and created universe. As we eagerly await the nativity of Jesus at Christmastime, the long nights of the advent season invite us into reflection upon our waiting for the Lord's return.

During Advent, we are called to settle into
the exquisite darkness,
to hibernate, rest and restore.
This cycle was given to us at the time of Creation.
We are invited to face the darkness in our own lives
and in the world around us.
The prophets assure us that the darkness will not overcome us.
They call us to watch for the light, notice the light,
and be warmed by its rays.
We are called to wait, to hope, to trust in promises made.
As we make this Advent journey,
we claim we come alive in both the light and the darkness.

*Call to Worship | Taizé – Our Darkness Is Never Darkness and Nada Te Turbe
Lights out. Candles burning. A bell is used to signal the beginning and end of times of silence.*

Welcome & Collect Prayer

How do we approach the season of Winter? Do we mourn the passing of Summer's warmth and Autumn's golden glow? Do we live in fear of shortened days, long nights and the cold of the coming days?

Or does the Winter remind us of the wonderful rhythm of God's creation? Seeds sown in Spring have grown, fruited and provided for our needs. Trees that provided shelter for wildlife have now shed their leaves which in due course will rot down and provide nutrients for the coming year. Plants in our gardens which have seemingly died lie dormant within the ground, ready to emerge and bring us joy in the Spring to come.

The countryside sleeps in Winter, and within it lies all the potential of Spring, Summer and Autumn!

Together we say

**You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they are sustained and have their being**

This is the God we serve,
A God of love, of healing and power.

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who loves us with a Father's love.

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who laughs as we laugh,

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who suffers as we suffer.

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who brings light into dark places.

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who brings warmth into hearts that are chilled.

All: Alleluia

This is the God we serve,
A God who sees within us the potential of Spring.

All: Alleluia

Scripture | Genesis 1:14-19

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

As we enter into this season of exquisite darkness—a time of hibernation for many plants, trees, and animals—what needs to settle and rest within you?

Ring the meditation bell to invite 2-3 minutes of quiet reflection.

Prayer

There is a winter in all of our lives, a chill and darkness that makes us yearn for days that have gone or put our hope in days yet to be.

Maker God, you created seasons for a purpose.

Spring is full of expectation
buds breaking
frosts abating and an awakening
of creation before the first days of summer.

Now the sun gives warmth
and comfort
to our lives
reviving aching joints
bringing color, new life
and crops to fruiting.

Autumn gives nature space
to rejoice and enjoy the fruits of its labor
vibrant colors in sky and landscape
as the earth prepares to rest.

Then winter,
cold and bare as nature takes respite,
slows and sleeps until the time is right.
An endless cycle
and yet a perfect model.

We need a winter in our lives.

A time of rest, a time to stand still.

A time to reacquaint ourselves
with the faith in which
we live and breathe.

It is only then that we can draw strength
from the one in whom we are rooted,
take time to grow
and rise through the darkness
into the warm glow of your springtime,
to blossom and flourish,
bring color and vitality into this world,
your garden.

Thank you, our God,
for the seasons of our lives.

Amen.

Scripture | John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We are called to be a light, a candle to bring the illumination of God's Truth and Word into lives that have yet to know the One who created all things. God's light brings not only light but the warmth of God's love wherever it touches.

Ring the meditation bell to invite 2-3 minutes of quiet reflection.

A Blessing for the Longest Night | Jan Richardson

All throughout these months
as the shadows
have lengthened,
this blessing has been
gathering itself,
making ready,
preparing for
this night.

It has practiced
walking in the dark,
traveling with
its eyes closed,
feeling its way
by memory
by touch
by the pull of the moon
even as it wanes.

So believe me
when I tell you
this blessing will
reach you
even if you
have not light enough
to read it;
it will find you
even though you cannot
see it coming.

You will know
the moment of its
arriving
by your release
of the breath
you have held

so long;
a loosening
of the clenching
in your hands,
of the clutch
around your heart;
a thinning
of the darkness
that had drawn itself
around you.

This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel
in the company
of a friend.

So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.

This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.

Prayers of the People

God of justice, we pray for our local community. Bless our local markets, food stores, cafes and restaurants. Bless us at the tables we share with family and friends, and make us good companions at meal times and beyond. Increase in us the spirit of hospitality to strangers. Teach us to live and to eat more simply, so that there may be more to share with the hungry of our neighborhood.

Giver of Life, hear our prayer.

God of justice, we pray for the poor, the hungry and all prisoners, and for the people we love who need your care today. Bring healing, peace and hope to all who suffer. Bring clean water and good food to the poor in every land. Bring spiritual nourishment to all who are hungry for truth.

Giver of Life, hear our prayer.

We commit ourselves to you, Mother of the Earth, **to be stewards of the land, to feed the hungry, and to walk humbly with you. Amen.**

Parting Poem | Rainer Maria Rilke

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
And make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

763 Our Darkness / La Ténèbre

Our dark - ness is nev - er dark - ness in your sight: the
La té - nè - bre n'est point té - nè - bre de - vant toi: la

deep - est night is clear as the day - light.
nuit com - me le jour est lu - miè - re.

Nothing Can Trouble

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Nada te turbe

Noth - ing can trou - ble; noth - ing can fright - en. Those who seek
Na - da te tur - be, na - da te es - pan - te. Quien a Dios

God shall nev - er go want - ing. God a - lone fills us.
tie - ne na - da le fal - ta. So - lo Dios bas - ta.

This meditative refrain from Taizé is based on a saying attributed to Teresa of Avila: "Let nothing trouble you; let nothing frighten you. All things are passing; God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever possesses God lacks nothing; God alone suffices."

Additional References

While the creators of the artwork and poetry are referenced above, there are a few additional sources which require mention and gratitude.

The music—Our Darkness (Le Tenebre) and Nothing Can Trouble (Nada Te Turbe)—comes from composer Jacques Berthier and the ecumenical Taizé community.

Prayers and other liturgical elements are sourced from:

Ashley Goff and Rob Passow. “Exquisite Darkness: A Winter Solstice Liturgy.” Washington, DC: Church of the Pilgrims (PCUSA). 2012.

John Birch. “A Christian Liturgy for the Winter Solstice.” Craigieburn, Victoria: St Thomas’ Uniting Church. June 30, 2013.

Maria Niechwiadowicz. “Blessing of our Gardens.” Charlottesville, VA: Trinity Episcopal Church. April 22, 2018.