

Call me: 1 John 1:1—2:2

Experiencing God as darkness makes determining how to walk in the light less certain than we might suspect or desire.

by [Craig Satterlee](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

I shudder when I'm reminded that it is painful for someone with dark skin to hear that "God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Being legally blind, I know firsthand that to walk in the light (1 John 1:7) often hurts. I wear sunglasses both to darken my world so that I can function and to protect my eyes from the light.

Scholars say that everyone in the ancient world agreed that God is light. But this premise plays differently to people for whom the light of day does not automatically bring safety and the darkness of night does not automatically signal danger. Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in John 3 gets flipped as preachers commend "Nick at Nite" as a spiritual role model, saying that nighttime is the right time to bring our biggest questions and deepest concerns to Jesus. Rather than providing a cloak of secrecy that covers fear, the dark of night brings clarity and calm as our lives slow and our most important questions surface. In this case something that was obvious to the ancients is ambiguous to us. Left unaddressed, all this talk of darkness and light may confuse us instead of proclaiming new life.

Fortunately, the author of 1 John does not leave "God is light" unaddressed. Later in the letter, "the message that we received . . . and proclaim to you" is further defined. The message heard from the beginning is that "we should love one another" (3:11), and the author asserts that God is love (4:8, 16). In Jesus, God is revealed as light and as love, and this revelation includes the commandment to love one another. To say that God is light is to say that God is love. To walk in the light is to love one another.

We walk in the light when we love one another enough to allow the power of Christ's resurrection to breathe new life into well-established theological words like *darkness* and *light*. I am troubled that writers are criticized for their lack of respect for *Webster's* when they avoid the masculine pronoun for God, using the term *Godself*. One person described the term as laughable and another said it is silly, since *Godself* does not appear in any reputable dictionary. I cannot help thinking that what is laughable for some is liberating and life-giving for others. Perhaps part of loving one another involves putting up with some silliness for the other's sake. I wonder how, if we cannot trust the risen Christ with our language, we will ever trust the risen Christ with our lives, our church and our world.

Often the first step in walking in the light by loving one another is to grope in the darkness of resurrection. When the risen Christ resurrects the phrase "God is light," for example, we may at first find ourselves plunged into holy darkness as former things pass away. But we will experience God in the darkness, as surely as Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Exod. 20:21). With the psalmist, we discover that darkness is not the absence of God, but God's secret place. Groping in the darkness of resurrection, we come to know that asserting that God's nature is light may not be wrong, but it is as limiting as asserting that God's nature is masculine. In fact, rather than describing that nature of God at all, "God is light" is one way of describing God's loving relationship with humanity, as revealed in God's saving action in Jesus Christ.

Experiencing God as darkness makes determining how to walk in the light less certain than we might suspect or desire. Since to walk in the light is to love one another, any prescription that absolutizes light as good and darkness as evil walks away from love rather than walking in it. Instead of prompting us to cling to the certainty of the light that we know, Christ's resurrection sets us to the holy work of groping in the darkness of resurrection. Perhaps this is why Isaiah praises those who walk in darkness by trusting in and relying on God rather than lights of their own.

Instead of offering lights to guide us, 1 John declares "what we have seen and heard." To grope in the darkness of resurrection is to confess our sin, the reality of our human nature. To confess our sin is to publicly and specifically acknowledge our need of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, and not merely to assent to a state of sinfulness. To deny the reality of our sin is to deny God's saving action in Christ and the love of God that sent Christ into the world. To deny our sin is to deny that God is love. Groping in the darkness of resurrection leads us to acknowledge that in

matters as silly as language and those as serious as our planet's future we need God to raise us to new life.

We confess our sin because whether we use light or darkness to describe God, we know that God's nature is to love and forgive us. We hear, see and touch God's love and forgiveness in the person of Jesus and in one another. Just as God's love was revealed in Jesus, so the power of Christ's resurrection, the transformation brought on by our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, finds concrete expression in the way we live each day as we love one another.

Walking in the light is distinctive because of loving behavior, which often appears to others as groping in the darkness. Thankfully, we neither walk in the light nor grope in the darkness of resurrection alone. God's message to love one another blesses us with others whom we can love, others with whom we learn how to walk in the light.