



Episode 55: Learn to Walk In The Dark

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 55.

If this is your first time listening in, this is a place for anyone struggling with decision fatigue of any kind and for any reason. Whether you are chronically hesitant, prone to indecision, or if you're simply in a difficult season of life and unsure what might be coming next, well, you're in the right place.

Each week I offer a story, a prayer, and a simple next right step. This week I'll share how the spiritual discipline of learning to walk in the dark is proving to be an essential part of my own spiritual formation. Listen in.

Last week on my Instagram stories - you can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram by the way, I shared something you may not know and I'll share it again here with you now in case you didn't see it there - it's that's that despite all my best efforts, I have so far been unable to work ahead on this podcast. I know that many hosts of many different podcasts can take one day a month and record like, four or five episodes or more in one day and then release those over time. I am not one of those hosts, at least not yet.

I don't know if it's because my show is so content heavy, or because it's just me and there's not another person to bounce things off of or some other weird thing about me and how my brain works but for the last year, this is how I work week by week, Monday to Monday, listening to my life, to the Lord, to the things happening around me and then responding in almost real time. This episode you're listening to now was drafted and recorded less than 24 hours ago.

In some ways? I get it. Of course, it makes sense that a podcast about just doing the next right thing would insist upon being created one step at a time no giant leaps allowed. I've learned that about life and art, every creative project I've ever been a part of requires a process that mirrors the message itself.

Because of that, today you get some reflections on the past few days for us, and because of Hurricane Michael that included a major power outage in our area. Now to be clear, we live in North Carolina. So, last month we were preparing for, waiting for, and watching for Florence, and while we are pretty far inland so Florence didn't hit us very hard, this hurricane we weren't really keeping much of an eye on. Mainly, because number one it came so fast, and number two it wasn't going to hit our coast.

For those of you that are on the Florida coast where this hurricane hit, man you have been on our minds and in our prayers as you rebuild during this difficult time.

We couldn't imagine here that this hurricane would be as strong as it was and honestly like I said, we weren't prepared for it. On Thursday afternoon, I sat at my kitchen table watching the rain fall and the wind pick up. John was out of town with our son and some other family members and so it was just me and girls at home. We knew it would be rainy. We knew it would be windy. But what we didn't expect was an hour of flickering lights and then at 3:45 on Thursday afternoon, the power went completely out.

In that moment I thought to myself, I wonder if this is going to be a few minutes or if we are in it for the long haul. Well, as it turns out the power stayed out for a full three days for us and for many in our community they still don't have power. Thousands and thousands of homes and businesses and schools have been without power this entire weekend in our area. And though we had a place to stay with my family and my in-laws we all sort of bunked up in one house that had power, we traveled back and forth a lot from the house we were staying in to our cul-de-sac. It was dark, and quiet, and cold.

In the evenings I would make my way over there and let the dog out and feed the cat and check on things in general, and it was our entire neighborhood that sat in the dark. In fact one major street we would drive down, the right hand side of the street had power and the left hand side where my neighborhood was was completely dark. Turning into it was like turning into a dark abyss.

Without the headlights, I couldn't see what was in front of me, in fact, a couple of times I turned them off to see how dark it truly was. It is so unnatural to be in your familiar surroundings but have them be so unfamiliar. That's what happens in the dark.

When I would pull into the house at night, turn off the headlights, walk up to the front door, I couldn't help but look up, wondering what the stars look like from our cul-de-sac. With all of the light that is normally there just with porch lights and street lights, it is difficult to see stars from where we live, but during these last few nights, they've been much brighter.

As I've walked up to the house, I could hear a distant hum of a generator from a neighbor down the street and several neighbors by night two had lit fires in their backyard. I could hear their voices, their laughter, their conversation, and I have to admit as inconvenient as the power outage was there was a part of me that longed to go join them to sit around their fires and enjoy the company that is always available but because of our fast paced lives, often not enjoyed.

Sunday, I arrived at church, I was a bit late, and as I walked in I realized there was no power there either. I sat in the back and took in the scene of our small congregation huddled around candlelight worshipping just like every Sunday except maybe a little differently. Because our church building used to be an old warehouse there is a garage door that can open up into the parking lot. So, in order to let the natural light in from outside, that door was open. It was a little chilly and it started to rain. As I listened to our pastor preach lit only by candlelight and the natural light that came from outside, as I watched the rain come down gently in the background and candles in the foreground, surrounded by the people in this church that I love, I recognized how this time in the darkness has allowed me to see things that are always there, but often go unnoticed.

We finally got our power back yesterday afternoon, the kids have school again after two days off, and things are slowly slipping back into gear.

But those few days of darkness reminded me of all the ways God is always here but, like Ryan O'Neal says in the Enneagram 4 song by Sleeping At Last, sometimes you have to turn out the lights to remember how to see.

Maybe it's time we learned how to walk in the dark.

For the past four years, I've shared a list online of my Top 10 Favorite books I read that year. (By the way, I'll put a link to some of those lists in the show notes for the last several years and I've been working on my 2018 list - coming in December!) But back in 2014, Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* was at the top of my list. I first found a copy at the library but as soon as I finished reading it, I knew it was one I had to own.

If you haven't read or heard of her book, it's one that will have you questioning everything you think you know about darkness and our experience of it. After becoming uncomfortable with the assumption that good things are associated with light and evil things with dark, she began to study darkness and all the ways God meets us there when we are unsure and when things are unseen.

If you can't tell, I highly recommend this book, especially if you are someone for whom the darkness has become your new normal if it scares you or is causing you to question your faith or your future, slowing you down as you try to discern your own next right thing. Well, this could be an important read for you.

The gift of the darkness is not necessarily that everything works out alright, more, it's that when we learn to walk through the darkness and survive it, well *We survive it*.

She says it better than I can:

“When, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.”

After the wind and rain of this past weekend, we navigated our way through our dark house, not a beam of light from a street lamp or a night light or even the light of the moon, I realize there's a skill to walking in the dark: you have to go slow, trust what you know, and take it one step at a time.

This next right thing mindset is changing how I make decisions, how I see the future, and how I move forward when I can't see my way.

If you are in the midst of your own darkness today, I hope these words have been a bit of comfort.

By way of a prayer and reflection, I'll read us a Psalm, one you may already know by heart so settle in and pray along with me, letting the true words sing out in the darkness.

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23

This is the Word of the Lord. It is absolutely true and given to us in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 55 of The Next Right Thing.

I'm grateful for Barbara Brown Taylor for having done the hard work of learning to walk in the dark. That's the name of her book that I highly recommend. I'll link to it in the show notes if you want to check it out.

As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman where I post almost daily, either a photo or a video in Instagram stories. I'd love to see you there.

If this podcast has been helpful for you and you want to make sure you don't miss an episode, well, I hope you'll subscribe of course it's free but that way each new episode will show up automatically in your podcast app on Tuesday mornings right when they release. You won't have to do a thing except hit play.

I'll close with some final words I read on the Instagram feed of a friend of mine, Christa Wells - a poet, a singer, a songwriter. She says this about walking in the dark and I treasure her hard-won perspective:

“You don't ever go backward down the hard road. You can't go back. You keep moving forward — seeing things that can only be seen in the dark — and becoming something new and radiant and brave and tested and powerful. You don't feel you are all those things often, but in time, some of them, some of the time. Some of them . . . some of the time. And that's something.”

Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.