

"The Dark Night of the Soul"

July 26, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture text: Romans 8: 26-27

I just want to take a moment this morning to lift up and cherish the work of the Holy Spirit. At least one small part of it. When I think about who the Holy Spirit is and what it does my mind instantly goes big. The Holy Spirit is the 3rd part of the trinity. God has showed up on earth in three different ways. First God came as the creator and administrator of the earth. God came again in God's Son, Jesus, to redeem the earth and make a way for its people to come home to God again. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, God came and continues to come in the Holy Spirit to work in and through people as God continues to reveal God's will and power. These three ways God works on the earth is known as the Trinity. There is only one God, but God shows up and works in three different ways. We use the terms Father, Son and Holy Ghost or creator, redeemer and sustainer. For the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost to be put in the same company as God the creator and Jesus the redeemer is a pretty big deal. And it deserves to be there. The Holy Spirit empowers all the Spiritual gifts the Bible talks about from speaking in tongues and healing to administration and teaching to discernment, hospitality and faith itself. As we invite it in and nurture it, the Holy Spirit grows within us as individuals and produces the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be more than we could ever be on our own. The work of the Holy Spirit is huge, but also very close, very intimate. It softens our hearts and minds, breaking down our own defenses that a little bit of God's Word might penetrate and work its way in.

It is one of those close, intimate ways the spirit works that I want to highlight this morning. St. John of the Cross was a 16th-century Christian mystic. A mystic is someone who truly, deeply wants to have a direct, personal, transformative experience with God. More than knowing about God, they want to experience God and seek to do so through passionately following Spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, solitude, Scripture, fasting, silence, contemplation and self-denial. What John of the Cross found was in his own journey as well as the journey of many others, they hit a wall – a dry spell. When a person is new to Christianity and just starting to study and pray, revelations from God come quickly and come often. You experience changes in your attitude, your outlook, and your way of thinking about and seeing the world. God touches you and it is exciting. But as you continue, the changes come more slowly. For some, they put in the work of prayer and contemplation. They add more spiritual disciplines like fasting and giving. They are doing everything they know to do, but God is silent. They are doing their part and are desperately seeking God, but their soul experiences spiritual dryness, confusion, and a sense of separation from God. Sometimes this dry spell comes in connection with some outside influence like the death of a loved one or having to move to a different part of the country or a physical illness. Sometimes it comes after our heart is broken or a long time of unanswered prayers. Sometimes there is no cause at all. It just comes. We look to the God

who has always been there for us and God seems absent. St. John of the Cross put those feelings down in a poem and defined that period of intense spiritual struggle, doubt, or perceived absence of God as “the dark night of the soul”. We see it in some of our Bible heroes. Job wrote down his struggle so we would not feel alone in ours. King David wrote many a Psalm of his dark times. After winning a great victory for God, Elijah found himself feeling abandoned by God as he ran for his life. Even Jesus on the cross cries out “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me.” This “dark night of the soul” is nothing new to God’s people.

Spiritual directors advise us to follow the lead of those in the Bible and keep praying, keep worshiping, keep serving, and keep spending time with God. They say spiritual growth seldom comes nice and smooth and even. It often comes more like stairs. Stairs are long flat parts with a sudden jump straight up. And those long flat parts where you are doing your part but nothing is changing are hard. That is where we experience these dark nights of the soul. But keep going. You are about to come to a huge jump. Just hold on, keep doing your part, God has not left you.

But how do you do that? When every prayer seems empty, every act of kindness is sheer discipline, every verse of Scripture feels like a fairytale, and every moment spent with God feels like a waste of time; how do you keep going? When you are simply out of words to pray because every word seems completely empty, how do you keep praying?

Romans 8, verse 26, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words.” I love that. You put yourself in the place and say “God” and just stay there. Let the Holy Spirit intercede for you. Invite the Holy Spirit to lift the prayers you cannot find the words for. Go to your place of prayer and let the Spirit “groan” to God for you. One of the reasons we pray “The Lord’s Prayer” together every week is exactly this. There are prayers we do not have the words for, prayers we don’t even know we have, but we go to God in prayer using the words Jesus taught us, and count on the Holy Spirit to intercede for us.

Going through the “dark night of the soul” is not a requirement and not everyone experiences it, but if you do, it can leave you in a place of such abandonment and isolation that it seems endless. But God has not left you. You are getting ready for a huge spiritual jump. Just keep on keeping on. Keep putting yourself in the place of worship, the place of prayer, the places of God’s presence. And the rumbling you hear that sounds like your prayers echoing into nothing, is actually the sound of the Holy Spirit speaking to God on your behalf, “interceding with groans too deep for words”. If the second member of the Trinity interceding for us leads to our forgiveness and eternal life, I know the third member can make that stair step jump for us if you just keep putting yourself in the place God can touch you. Don’t give up.

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