

Mind the Light

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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EPIPHANY

Isaiah 9:2-6; John 8:12

Years ago, an elderly woman shared this story: “I was living at Sandy Hook when I met Jacob Walker. He kept the Sandy Hook Lighthouse. He took me to that lighthouse as his bride. I enjoyed it because it was on land and I could keep a garden and raise vegetables and flowers.

“But after a few years, Jacob was transferred to Robbins Reef. The day we came here I said, ‘I won’t stay. The sight of water whichever way I look makes me lonesome and sad.’ At first, I refused to unpack my trunks and boxes. I unpacked them a little at a time. After a while they were all unpacked and I stayed on.

“My husband caught a heavy cold while tending the light. It turned into pneumonia. It was necessary to take him to the Smith Infirmary on Staten Island, where he could have better care than I could give him at the lighthouse. I could not leave the light to be with him. He understood. One night, while I sat up there tending the light, I saw a boat coming. Something told me what news it was bringing me. I expected the words that came up to me from the darkness. ‘We are sorry, Mrs. Walker, but your husband is worse.’ ‘He is dead,’ I said.

“We buried him in the cemetery on the hill. Every morning when the sun comes up I stand at the port-hole and look in the direction of his grave. Sometimes the hills are white with snow. Sometimes they are green. Sometimes brown. But there always seems to come a message from that grave. It is what I heard Jacob say more often than anything else in his life. Just three words... ‘Mind the light.’” Mrs. Walker, still minding the light, was 70 years old when she was interviewed. Her husband had been dead 32 years and still she was faithfully minding the light.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined.” Epiphany – the season of light, the season when, symbolized in the journey of the Wise Men, we see and celebrate the revelation of Jesus as the Light of the World; when we dare to affirm that the passing thing is darkness, the lasting thing is light. We are now the ones who are called to mind the light, to nourish the light, to share the light. But it isn’t always easy, is it – to see the light, to trust the light, to mind the light, especially in those times when there seems to be nothing but darkness all around.

I want to share something I often share at memorial services – some of you have heard this before. I once read that there are astronomers and physicists who propose that at the heart of the universe there lurks a massive black hole – a collapsed mass so large and dense that nothing can escape its gravitational pull...not even light. A rather grim point of view when you think about it...at the heart of all things – darkness. And yet, we all know moments when that is exactly how we feel – when all around us seems so dark that we wonder if we will ever see the light again.

The prophet, Isaiah, speaks of us as a people who walk in darkness. And, says Frederick Buechner, “If darkness is meant to suggest a world where nobody can see very well – either themselves, or each other, or where they are heading, or even where they are standing at the moment; if darkness is meant to convey a sense of uncertainty, of being lost, of being afraid; if darkness suggests conflict – conflict between races, between nations, between individuals who are pretty much out for themselves when you come right down to it; then, yes, we live in a world that knows much about darkness. And in our individual lives we know much about darkness too. If we are people who pray, darkness is apt to be a lot of what

our prayers are about. If we are people who do not pray, it is apt to be darkness in one form or another that has stopped our mouths.” Oh yes, we know darkness.

And yet, after acknowledging the darkness, the prophet dares to proclaim that into this darkness in all its many forms, into this darkness, a great light will shine. And on this Epiphany Sunday, we dare to go even further and proclaim that into this darkness, a great light has already come, a light for all the world. Says Buechner, “In the darkness of a Judean night, in the midst of a nowhere town to parents who were nobodies, the child was born, and whoever it was that delivered him, slapped his bare backside to start the breath going, and he cried out, as each one of us cried out, at the shock and strangeness of being born into the darkness of the world. But then, as the Gospels picture it, all heaven broke loose. The darkness was shattered like glass, a new star blazed forth where there had never been a star before, and the air was filled with the bright wings of angels...Strange kings arrived out the East to lay kingly gifts at the feet of this even stranger and more kingly child. This is how, after all the weary centuries of waiting, the light is said finally to have come into the world.”

But of course we are skeptical people living in a skeptical age that most covets the blunt language of fact. What is real is what can be verified by science, can be proven with hard evidence. A virgin, a star, kings from the East, a choir of angels? Hardly seems likely. In fact, neither the Gospel of Mark nor Paul even mention a birth story. If we had been present at that birth, would we have seen a birth any more marvelous than any other birth? And yet, whether there were ten thousand angels, or just two weary parents, today we dare to affirm that in the birth of that child into the darkness of the world, into the darkness of our lives, a new light, indeed a whole new way of living life, burst into our reality.

And if all that seems just a little too much to take in, too much to believe, maybe we can turn to these words of Henri Nouwen: “Often we want to be able to see into the future. We say, ‘How will next year be for me? Where will I live five or ten years from now?’ There are no answers to these questions. Mostly we have just enough light to see the next step – what we have to do in the coming hour or the coming day. The art of living is to enjoy what we can see and not complain about what remains in the dark. When we are able to take the next step with the trust that we will have enough light for the step that follows, we can walk through life with joy, and be surprised at how far we go....”

Trusting we will have enough light for the step that follows... Could this be at the heart of our Epiphany message? I don’t pretend to have answers or solutions for the many forms of darkness in our world or in our hearts. Perhaps all I can say is trust – have faith...trust that in this child, in the man he grew to be, there is the power of God to bring light into our darkness, to make us whole, again to give a new kind of life altogether, even to those such as you and me – a new kind of life in which, little by little, we begin to be able to love even our friends, at moments maybe even our enemies, and maybe, at last, even ourselves; a new kind of life in which, grasped by his spirit, caught up into his life, filled with his light, we find ourselves in deep and private ways healed and transformed by our relationship with him.

Adeste fidelis...Come and behold him, born the king of angels. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that the light that first burst into our world at Bethlehem can shine in each of our hearts – illuminating within ourselves and our world something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than we ever knew before or than ever we could have known without him. Yes, always just enough light for the next step that follows.

In the words of the carol, “There’s a song in the air. There’s a light in the sky.” And may there be many more of them!