

Meditation "Light in a Dark World" Matthew 2:1-23 Isaiah 60:1-6

Woody and I finally took our Christmas tree and decorations down Friday, packing them carefully since we will be moving this year. Last Sunday our church had planned to observe Epiphany Sunday, but the bitter cold nixed that. So today, a week-plus late, we heard the story of Jesus and his parents, first honored by wise men in that cold and harsh world, and then threatened by the King in power, King Herod, as he sought to kill any competition to his reign. It was a dark world where innocent children were slaughtered even as God warned Joseph, Mary and Jesus to become refugees in Egypt until Herod died.

I had a sermon started for the Sunday we missed, but this week's events have caused me to head a different direction from the one I might have taken last Sunday.

This weekend, someone asked me if I think that our United States President is a Christian. How can one person really know the heart of another? We cannot. But partly because I am a pastor, I felt stressed by this question. I do not know. But words of Jesus come to my mind, and I find them significant:

"What defiles a person is **not what goes into the mouth**; it is what comes out of the **mouth** that defiles a person." (Matthew 15:11) This week there has not been a lot of evidence of much Christianity being practiced in Washington, D.C. Salvadorans who were granted asylum here years ago after a devastating earthquake in their country were told, "Time's up! You have just over a year to leave the USA." And young folks whose parents brought them to this country illegally but who have grown up here and bought houses had children of their own and perhaps even served in our armed forces are now totally on edge, not sure whether they will be forced to leave now or not.

And then there are the president's reported words, where he vulgarly designated Haiti and countries in Africa as being places nobody would want to live and suggested that we in the USA do not want such immigrants.

The timing of his statements was worse than awful, because tomorrow our nation observes Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, also designated by some as Human Relations Day, where we remember how far we have come from days of slavery and outright racism and how much further we need to go for the good of all of us. For me, the statements took me back to my early years when I lived in Alabama and routinely heard words of derogatory insult hurled against darker-skinned people. It was not right back then, and it is not right now. And it is certainly not the way of Jesus Christ!

How Christian can we be in this dark world? (pause)

In 1994, my husband Woody made his first trip to Africa, to the country of Mozambique. All he knew about the country was that the people had been ruled by the Portugese for years and that they had very recently ended a period of 16 years of war when he arrived. Roads bore the marks of bombs. People lived in poverty. Young men held onto weapons, for that was most of what they knew. When he arrived after hours of travel, he was assigned to sleep in a certain house. Late at night, he was delivered to the tiny house, where three women looked at him in dismay as he stood at their door. They had expected to host a woman, not a man. They recovered quickly and welcomed Woody, and for an hour or two they all sought to communicate. Woody, who was by then totally exhausted, finally told them that he needed to go to bed. Horrified, the women exclaimed, "But not yet! You have not eaten! We have prepared

you a dinner!” So a dinner was served, with the women watching as chicken and rice and a few other things were set before Woody. The women did not eat, and later Woody understood that the food they had prepared for him was more than they would have had in a week. It was a challenging lesson in gracious, generous hospitality.

There was much more to learn from these people who had so little material comfort and had suffered so much loss to war. Whenever they waited, in a two-day-long line to hopefully see a doctor or a nurse at a clinic, in a restaurant waiting for service, or waiting in line for a turn to fill a container with drinking water, the people sang with joy, appreciating, it seemed, every moment. They sang praises at church and at the market. They had a joy deeper than anything Woody had ever witnessed, and in some ways he brought it home to share with me.

To call a place a “hell-hole” or whatever other kind of hole you might suggest is to be blind to God’s possibilities with, in and through the people who live there. It is also to be blind to the power and presence of God and God’s purposes! Sometimes the darkness of this world is most evident in our own attitudes.

Long ago, the people who walked in darkness and despair were given a great Light, the love and power of God wrapped in swaddling clothes, a brown-skinned man named Jesus who ended up meeting the ugliness of power-hungry kings and misguided crowds with forgiveness and the offer of life that cannot be diminished by any kind of death or sin. Jesus of Nazareth, who is our Savior even today, and who continues to ask us to love God and to love one another as much as we are able.

At Christmas we celebrated the Light that came into this dark world and that continues to offer hope and challenge even today. Now, we are challenged as followers of Jesus to *live* in the Light of Christ and share it with others.

It’s not so hard to understand the dark world, the competition, the insults, how easy it is to look down on others while we try to pump ourselves up. These things are too often part of our own lives. My prayer is that we may also - by God’s amazing and persistent grace - learn how changed and blessed we can be if we will only dare to let the Light of our Lord shine into our hearts and out through our actions to others. A simple prayer can open us: “I need you, Lord, for I am angry and scared and too often just out for myself. Please help me and lead me in YOUR ways.”

Praying to God may not change our circumstances or the people for whom we pray, but it CAN change us, the way we look at things, and this can make all the difference in the world.

Henri Nouwen told the story of a rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when the dawn had come. One student responded by saying, “When you can see the sheep on the hill.” Another suggested that one can tell that the dawn has come when a person is able to distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine. “No,” said the wise one. “It is dawn when you can look into the face of human beings and you have enough light within you to recognize them as your sisters and brothers.” (Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), p.204)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on them has light shined.  
Jesus came to offer hope, forgiveness and a new way of finding life in the midst of dark times.  
Today, this year, may God’s Light shine in this world, and in and through our lives. Amen.