

January 11, 2015 "Sort of Like Today" Matthew 2:1-12 *Isaiah 60:1-6* Genesis 1:1-5ctw

It's over! The Ball dropped and we had to get new calendars, then we missed last Sunday's worship because of icy conditions— so now we're well into the year 2015. The Christmas lights that seemed so right two weeks ago now seem dated. The celebration of what took place in Bethlehem flickers past us, leaving in its wake decorations to be packed up and bills to be paid.

It feels empty, to have it over so abruptly. There's a letdown. So much preparation, and then it's over. Sort of like Times Square the morning after the New Year's Eve hoopla, where the only real activity is the hugely expensive and terribly needed clean-up.

The holy night in Bethlehem would almost seem to have been a passing dream, were it not for gospel-writer Matthew's story of the wealthy, educated wise men/magi, having noticed the special star in the sky, making a long and difficult journey to find the reason for that star. Matthew's story of those wise men and King Herod's desperate attempt - so like so many of the world's leaders today - to get rid of any competition even if it meant killing hundreds of innocent toddlers, tears away the sentimental wrappings of Christmas and declares: This Savior is for those who are living in a tough, dark world. The work of God through this Jesus is for the real world, for those who are struggling with tough conditions and terrorism and dealing with people who betray you or let you down. If you know this kind of darkness, if you live in this kind of world, Jesus is for you.

The Gospel of Luke shows the glad tidings of Jesus' birth being given to lowly (bottom-of-society's-barrel) shepherds. The Gospel of Matthew goes to the trouble to let us know that wealthy, educated Gentiles (non-Jews) from somewhere in the East recognized God's activity in Israel and responded to it better than God's own chosen people did. The foreign "wise men" noticed the signs of their times, interpreted them, and acted on their understanding in a positive way, traveling great distance to pay homage to the young child. The Jewish king Herod reacted quite differently, seeking to protect his own power by extinguishing the Light... We know the story well, how Herod ordered the massacre, and how Joseph was warned in a dream to take little Jesus out of the country, thus saving him. God acted to preserve God's gift of Light to the world.

In Isaiah 60, verses 1-6, the prophet declares, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..." To whom did Isaiah refer when he proclaimed this? In his time, probably Jews who were in exile. Perhaps also Gentiles who were considered to be in the dark because they were not included in the group of God's chosen people. Certainly Christians have viewed the people in darkness as those who were waiting for the Messiah to come and save them. And perhaps in 2015 this refers to *any* who have yet to grasp God's love for us, who struggle to see light in a confusing world, who find ourselves dwelling in a world not all that different from the harsh world into which Jesus was born.

Consider this week's news reports: Trials for corrupt political figures; contaminated schools; terrorist attacks in Paris; suicide bombings; the continued search for parts of the crashed airliner and recovery of bodies; the beginning of the jury selection of the Boston Bomber brother; the

search put on hold for the woman apparently lost while kayaking in New Hartford late at night; more and more robberies, shootings, more tension between police and communities; unbalanced budgets, and flu at epidemic levels, even in our own state. It's enough to make our world seem pretty dark.

Darkness can come from personal experiences, too. The young man who wrote an on-line threat against East Lyme because he felt too bullied must have experienced huge anger and powerlessness. Lots of folks in our world feel the same. Not too long ago someone told me, "I feel as though I am drowning in the negativities of my life. I cannot seem to be positive in my outlook or my relationships, and I find myself totally critical and angry about almost everything. I cannot look ahead and see any light."

"The people who walk in darkness..." Perhaps the most difficult darkness for us to deal with is that powerful undertow in our own lives that would convince us that somehow we are excluded, that somehow I am left out from God's love, that somehow God who knows everything about me could not possibly claim me as a beloved child.

If there's one thing the Bible in its entirety seems to say, it's this: "If you feel like an outsider, that you don't belong, that you are not worthy of being included in God's family, then you are definitely IN, for *you* are one Christ Jesus came to save. The gospels make it clear that the babe born in Bethlehem to become our Savior was quick to welcome the very folks that others would exclude: the poor, the lame, the sinners, the outcast. He came to seek and save the lost. Through the gospel stories, God shows us that *anybody who experiences the dark enough to realize the need for light is "in."*

So where is Light? From the Genesis reading we heard that Light was part of the first phase of God's Creation; God is an expert when it comes to bringing forth light out of dark chaos. The Bible declares that God so loved the world and each of us, even when we feel as though we are drowning in darkness, that he fully entered into human life through Jesus, to give us a life-touching, breathable picture of Light shining in darkness and love refusing to be overcome by failure or hatred. The baby grew up to be our Savior, to show us what it means to live in God's light, and to turn on the lights for us when we cannot find or create light ourselves.

Preacher Bob Woods told of a couple who took their son, 11, and daughter, 7, to Carlsbad Caverns. When the tour reached the deepest point of the cavern, the guide turned off all the lights to dramatize how completely dark and silent it is below the earth's surface. The little girl, suddenly enveloped in utter darkness, was frightened and began to cry. Her brother's voice immediately sounded: "Don't cry. Somebody here knows how to turn on the lights." (p. 122, *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, edited by Craig Brian Larson*)

God knows how to turn on the Light for each of us.

God's light has been given to us, wrapped in the birth of a child to reveal to us all who and what we really are: children of God. We do not need to grope blindly through the darkness of our lives,

scared that the unseen and unknown are going to "get us," worried about when the shoe is going to drop, or how our lives are going to fall apart. We are invited instead to walk in the light of God's promise that we are loved, that God really is with us, and that we are included in God's plan as cherished and necessary parts of God's story of love for this world.

The wise men read the signs of their times and noticed God's activity. They dared to follow the Star. If there were words spoken by those wise ones, we do not have them. But we *do* have the record of their actions, carried out at great expense, danger and trouble. Their actions have become part of the broadening story of God's Light given for this world, the promise of hope, that even in a world so messed up that a ruler would slaughter innocent children to protect his own power and God's Son would be tortured and hung on a cross, God's love was and is not stymied. The power of God's love-sharing Light still shines; darkness has not overcome it.

May we be as wise as those foreign travelers. May we read the signs of our times, and watch for ways God is at work in our world. May we hold ever before us the promises and stories we have received and let them give light and challenge to our days. And may we pray to receive well and faithfully whatever we face in life, so that through *our lives* new stories of God's Light so able to shine in darkness may be shared. The Light belongs to God. The story is God's. By the grace of God and through our willingness to receive God's gifts, may God turn on the Light in our hearts, and then give us the strength and faith to let it shine for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.