

“Mind the Light”
Matthew 1:18-23; Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2: 9b-11; John 1: 1-5, 9-12
Salem United Methodist Church
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015
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What is so special about Christmas Eve? Why do we come to worship in the darkness of night and not on Christmas morning when we could rejoice that the Christ Child has been born? What is so special about celebrating his coming in the evening? I believe it is because we have a difficulty in expressing the inexpressible message of God’s love coming into the world as a baby. The biblical writers did, too. We will hear later how the writer of the Gospel of John tries to express Jesus’ birth in a metaphor of light coming in the darkness.

This past Advent we here at Salem have been discovering how God breaks through the bedlam or chaos of our lives. We’ve acknowledged that the Christmas season can be utter bedlam as we prepare for it with our traditions of shopping, gift giving, decorating, and attending parties. Yet when we are open to the presence of God, the presence of Christ, we can discover how God is with us, how their Light shines in our darkness. So with keeping this metaphor of light and darkness, I have some stories to share with you.

One hundred years ago my grandmother was a young girl who lived on a farm here in Maryland. This was before electricity was available to the rural regions. The farming families lit their homes in the evening and early morning with oil lamps. These lamps needed to be tended daily. First, the oil needed to be refilled. Without the oil, there would be no light. Second, the lamp’s globe needed to be cleaned. Sometimes the oil would smoke leaving black soot on the glass which diminished the shining of the light. As a young girl my grandmother’s job was to clean this lamp and make sure the oil was filled every day so the family would have light in their home when darkness fell. They read, did homework, and sewed by this light. When it was time to go to bed, her mother would take the lamp and lead the family to their rooms. This lamp provided the only light source in the home. Tending to the lamp or minding the light as my grandmother referred to it was vitally important. Without it the family would have sat in darkness when the sun set.

Here’s another story about the importance of minding the light. We are blessed in Maryland to have the Chesapeake Bay. Did you know that there are close to 50 light houses around the Bay? Some are no longer functioning. Even with all the technology that we have for navigation today, light houses still have a function in guiding ships through the dark and stormy weather. Years ago the lights in lighthouses were oil burning lamps. Today they have electric lights but they still need to be staffed. Without these lights guiding ships, many would lose their lives. There is a story about a lighthouse keeper in New Jersey. He became ill with pneumonia and needed to be hospitalized. His last words to his wife before he died were, “Mind the Light.” She took the job of “minding the light” for years saving many lives.

That first Christmas night was a very dark time. The people of Judea lived under the constant threat the cruel King Herod. The violent Roman soldiers would sweep the villages without any warning to pillage, maim, kidnap, and kill. In the midst of these circumstances, Joseph’s world collapses around him when he finds out his fiancé is pregnant, knowing that the baby isn’t his. By law, he could have had Mary killed for adultery, but then an angel delivers incredulous news. Mary’s baby is God’s Son—the promised Messiah. This may not have been Good News for Joseph. How does one raise God’s Son? One can certainly understand him questioning all this with, “Why me? I’m just a simple man.” To make matters worse, Joseph receive news that he must travel to Bethlehem for a census when Mary was ready to deliver. What more could go wrong? Oh, yes, then the only space available for Mary to give birth is a dirty stable. What a dark time! They have no family nearby and no proper place for a

birth. Yet, the light broke through their darkness. Jesus is born. God's Love came as a baby needing human love to survive. Emmanuel is born-God with us. God kept the promise. God broke through this bedlam. The Gospel of John tells of Christ's birth with these words, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

I have a box which I opened and closed in the dark, so there is nothing but darkness in this box, right? When I open it, will the darkness overcome the light in this room? No! It is scientifically impossible and with God it is impossible as well. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Even Jesus' death on the cross did not destroy the light. The empty tomb is a witness that light overcomes darkness.

There is much darkness in our world today. We know that there are people whose life's mission is to destroy others and harm our world. The darkness of fear creeps in. We can feel like there is no hope, no peace, no joy, and no love. Mind the light. The light is there. Do you see it burning? After the attacks in Paris last month, the image that I will remember is this. The evening after the attack, lighted candles carried the message of the goodness in Paris and the hope of a brighter tomorrow. The light broke through the darkness of the previous evening.

Darkness is not new to our world. The Christmas of 1863 was a particularly dark time for our nation. The War Between the States or the Civil War was at its height. Thousands of men were being killed in battles or returned home severely injured. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the famous poet, was struggling during the Christmas of 1863. The year before, his wife died tragically in a fire. His son, Charlie, had enlisted in the Union army and was shot in the back in November of 1863. Henry brought Charlie home to try to nurse him back to health. By Christmas, Henry still did not know if his son would recover or succumb to his injuries. That Christmas of 1863 as Henry was in deep grief and great despair, the church bells rang as was the custom. As Henry was listening to the ringing of the bells, they seemed to be mocking the birth of the Prince of Peace. Out of his despair, he wrote: "There is no peace on earth, For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men."

In the midst of the bedlam today both in the horrible world events and in the midst of the dark places of our personal lives, the promise of the One who came to save us is not broken. God's peace and light break through. It did for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As the bells continued to ring, the Emmanuel-God with us broke through. With the ringing of the bells, the Light of Christ shone in Longfellow's darkness of despair. As it did, Longfellow wrote another verse, "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail, with peace on earth, good-will to men." In the midst of darkness, pain, tragedy, suffering, and/or sorrow, we may think and feel that God does not exist. Or that God doesn't care. We can cry out to God, "Why?" or "Where are you?" or "Where were you when..." These are great questions. It is when we ask these questions that we are paving the way for the light to shine in our darkness. It is when we ask these questions that we are cleaning our globes so the light can shine brightly. It is when we ask these questions that we are opening ourselves to receive the greatest gift-the power of the Christ Child's Love and Light. It is when we ask these questions that Christ comes offering us salvation, joy, hope, and peace.

None of us know what tomorrow will bring. There may be pain, sorrow, and grief. And there may be joy and hope. No matter, Jesus is that Light that overcomes the darkness! And he tells us that we are the light of the world. We are to "mind the light," to keep the light of Christ burning brightly. We are to keep that light bright, clear, and visible so the world knows who Jesus is. Mind the light. Reflect the light of Christ every day, not just on Christmas Eve, so that the dark corners of our world will be illuminated.

Resources: *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam* by James Moore