



The Dark and the Light are Both Alike
January 3, 2010: The Sunday of The Epiphany
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, to whom the dark and the light are both alike: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Happy Epiphany to all.

Today we mark the Feast of the Epiphany.

The Feast of Epiphany marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas in the Western Church. The wise ones from far away visit the manger where baby Jesus lies, flanked by Mary and Joseph and the barnyard animals. The presence of these reverent strangers symbolizes the wider world into which the message of love and justice goes, flowing out from the sacred birth. Epiphany of course means “to reveal” or “to make manifest” something that was not present or obvious before. The Feast of Epiphany begins the *season* of Epiphany. During this season, we examine the trajectory of the revelation of God in Jesus, and how it goes out into the world and how it draws people in.

And we realize that we are a little bit early. By regular counting we are only on the 10th day of Christmas. But Church tradition, for those who care about these things, permits the celebration of certain feasts that don't already fall on a Sunday to be moved to the nearest Sunday.

One of the pieces of Christian symbolism that is amplified by the Epiphany, and Christmas as well, is light. In the Gospel this morning, the wise men follow the light of a star. And the light of the star shines on the place where Jesus lay. From the prophet Isaiah this morning, we learn that the light of the Lord will arise in the thick darkness that is covering the people.

Many Christians throughout the ages have understood Isaiah to be pointing to the Messiah. In the Gospel of John last week, we heard the epic line—"the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1.5) The unmistakable take-away is that darkness is bad. The light, of course, refers to Jesus.

I take part in an online preaching group that meets on Mondays. Ministers from around the country reflect together on the Biblical texts for the coming weeks. A couple of weeks ago, we were meditating on the Christmas and Epiphany texts that lay ahead. An African American woman who is a pastor in the Diocese of Maryland shared her struggle with texts which, when not handled with care, promote exclusively negative echoes of darkness. It's not a stretch to imagine with her the way in which that prejudice attaches to people who have dark skin.

I admit to a growing unease with clumsy use of such texts, particularly as we grow in awareness of how our institutions, sacred texts, and traditions have been abused to overpower and exclude groups of people; sometimes out of ignorance and insensitivity, but more often out of a desire to maintain control and dominance.



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The kinds of conversations I've had with people of color in the church, and the way that our culture, and the Bible, has a vilified darkness, is giving me pause. I've needed to pray and reflect and be mindful of how I use metaphors of light *and* dark to bring all of us into the deeper presence of God and to proclaim Christ's power to bring hope, healing, and justice to all people.

This isn't caving into something called "political correctness." Many use that phrase as a term of derision. I think of those who use that term, and I myself have used it, as perhaps being unwilling to be inconvenienced by the attempt to understand an issue from the point of view of someone who has had a different, and likely a toxic or destructive, lived experience connected to the term or idea that is being disparaged as politically correct.

And so, on this Epiphany, I briefly explore with you possibilities that may reveal some of the ways we might integrate our understandings of light and dark as vehicles to express our trust in the power of God to create and to heal.

Darkness has gotten a bad rap. Even though there are only about 100 or so verses in Scripture that make reference to darkness, almost universally they are negative. And they reinforce the prevailing prejudice in our culture. In the Hebrew testament (the Scriptures that Jesus knew) light stands for life, and darkness stands for death. When God is angry with humanity, they are sent into darkness. You may recall that "locusts darken the land," for example, as one of the 10 plagues which assault Egypt. (Exodus 10.1-20) In the Christian testament (the Scriptures that bear witness to Jesus) light stands for understanding, and darkness for ignorance. Those who refuse to believe in Jesus are "wild waves of the sea casting upon the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved forever." (from the New Testament: The Letter of Jude, v. 13,)

However, even in Scripture, there is a counter-witness. There are other important passages where darkness is life giving. For example, do you remember God's attempt to convince senior citizens Abraham and Sarah that they would have children? God invites Abraham outside to look up in the night sky to the stars. "Your descendants will number more than the stars in the sky," God says. (Genesis 26.4) Without darkness, it would not have been possible for Abraham to see the stars—darkness, in fact, helps Abraham to trust God.

And there's more: Abraham's grandson Jacob, as he runs through the desert from the elder brother he shamefully cheated out of his birthright, puts his head down on a stone for a pillow as night falls. And as he sleeps, he dreams of a ladder to heaven with angels going up and down, and God tells him that God will never leave him alone. Later in his story, Jacob wrestles with the angel by a river all night long and emerges with a new name and a blessing. Jacob's son Joseph has dreams at night that make him Pharaoh's right-hand man. Even more: the Exodus happens at night: God parts the Red Sea at night; manna falls in the wilderness at night.



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I grew up in what was once a remote, rural part of Maryland. We had no streetlamps. We couldn't see or hear our nearest neighbors through the woods. At night in my bedroom, if it was summer, and the windows were open, there was the symphony of frogs and cicadas. If it was winter and the windows were closed, the dark and quiet were nearly absolute. As a child, I found it a bit unnerving. But going back to visit as a young adult, I had come to trust the dark, the sweetness and quiet softness of it, like velvet, like a soft blanket. The absence of sound swallowed up the chattering voices in my head and allowed me to imagine the still small voice of God.

In a marvelous book called Learning to Walk in the Dark, Barbara Brown Taylor describes a spelunking adventure that she experiences with the help of expert guides. As they move deeper and deeper into the cave, they enjoy several "long sits," when they turn off their lamps and sit in silence. During the final "long sit" of this particular trek, as she turns off her lamp, her mind begins to wander to other caves. For example, she remembers that it was entirely possible that Jesus was born in a cave. As those who have been to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem can tell you, the purported place where Jesus was born is actually a cave. And in fact, Taylor learned when she visited that holy site, a cave, if a shepherd could find one, was much better and safer than a wooden stable. And the Biblical witness is clear that Jesus was buried in a cave, sealed off by a large rock. Taylor writes that whatever happened there, happened in the dark. "If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark." (Learning to Walk in the Dark, pp. 128-129)

But there is a darkness in Scripture that is even more powerfully nuanced. The darkness that signifies the very presence of God. And it has nothing to do with what time of day it is. It is a word in Hebrew that is only used to refer to this holy darkness. As Taylor puts it, this darkness is dangerous, and it is as sure a sign of God's presence as brightness is and is so far beyond human imagining that trying to look at it would be like trying to look into the sun. (Learning to Walk in the Dark, p. 47)

Another freeing insight in Scripture about darkness and light and God is echoed in Psalm 139.10-11: "If I say surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night, darkness is not dark to you, the night is as bright as the day, darkness and light are to you both alike."

What the Psalm tells us is what the totality of Scripture and human experience also tell us: that to be human, as Taylor puts it, "is to live by sunlight *and* moonlight, with anxiety *and* delight, admitting limits *and* transcending them, falling down *and* rising up. (Learning to Walk in the Dark, p. 55) Truth exists in the integration, not opposition of contrasts. And ultimately, what the Bible and human experience bear witness to, is both the obvious necessity *and* the utter insufficiency of language to tame, explain, or contain the living God.



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And so, I invite us to be open to the fullness of varying images for the Divine in the Bible, in our tradition and in our experience; to be aware of how our siblings in Christ from various backgrounds may experience images and metaphors in ways that differ from ours; to be mindful of how we can perpetuate harmful or incomplete images of God that undermine the sense of God's unconditional, never ending love beyond our own feeble understanding; in short, I invite us to be open to an Epiphany.

Amen.