

January 2, 2011

“The Gift of Light”

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The Gift of Light

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:1-8; Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Year A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
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Together they come: light and darkness. Neither can exist without the other. If it is all darkness, we stumble around not able to discern what is in the dark. If there is too much light, it blinds us and we see nothing. Darkness and light are the yin and yang that make the whole...each needing the other. The darker the sky, the brighter the stars twinkle.

We think of the story of Jesus' birth as one of light. The star shone to signify something special was happening. And yet Luke's story of the birth puts the birth in the context of Roman oppression. The Roman occupiers forced the native Palestinian people to leave their homes in order to be counted for a census. It was for the convenience of the occupiers that people had to travel, regardless of their circumstances.

In the context of darkness, light dawned.

We who live in this century celebrate the Messiah born in a stable, or a cave, where animals stayed the night for shelter and safe keeping.

We easily forget that shepherds, and others who cared for animals, were among the lowest of jobs. There was no dignity for those who slept with animals, who cleaned up after them, who sought shelter for them. Today we might compare them to farm workers, or hotel workers... those who glean and who clean up after others. The pay is bad, the benefits barely exist, no such thing as hazard pay and job security doesn't exist.

Into such darkness Jesus was born... the light came to expose injustice and oppression. The light came to the very heart of darkness and parked itself there. The stubborn light revealed inequity and injustice.

Without darkness, why would we need the light?

Matthew, drawing from different oral traditions, is the source of the story of the visit of the Magi from the East. Tradition has them following a bright star by night to the place where Jesus was born.

These Magi are symbolic. They represent the universality of Jesus Christ. They were not Jews. Their inclusion in the tradition signals that Jesus was born for all people, not just for his own people. The reading from Ephesians addressed the same issues of inclusiveness as they struggled whether or not Gentiles were included.

Even in the midst of such a wonderful message darkness lurks, seeking light as its counterpart.

Herod, symbol of the oppressive occupier, calls the foreign sight-seers to his office to find out all he could about this apparent threat in Bethlehem.

It appears his intent was to use them to find out all he could about this potential threat to his power.

Herod told the Magi that he also wanted to come and worship the child, asking them to return to tell him where Jesus was. He sought to turn them into spies. He tried to appear as light. But being warned in a dream, the Magi returned home by another route so as to avoid Herod.

You see how light and dark intermingle and co-exist in the story? But it gets even better!

If you were to continue to read beyond verse 12 in our reading for today, you would find that Herod was not a happy camper when he learned that the Magi took off for home and didn't return to snitch on the whereabouts of the little guy.

Herod was pretty mad. So he decided he would just kill all the little guys under the age of two. That way he would take care of the threat to his power.

Good thing Joseph had another dream where he was told to get his little guy and his mother Mary and high-tale it to Egypt. They became refugees and illegal immigrants in the land of Egypt.

Once again, light and darkness dwell together. Not only did Mary and Joseph leave Nazareth because of the census, but then they had to flee from Bethlehem, indeed their country, and go to a foreign land in order to stay alive.

Did it all happen in just this way? Is this an historical account? No. It didn't happen this way and this is not history. But it IS theology! It IS a statement of faith about how the world is and how God is. What better example of how darkness and light intertwine so as to be indistinguishable to us!

Like DNA, the parts are wrapped around each other in such a way that it looks whole. Some parts are dark and some parts are light.

So what does this have to do with us today?

Both Isaiah and Matthew call us to consider the reality of "revelation in the darkness." The magi are "warned in dream." God is revealed in the night as well as the day, the dark as well as the light, the unconscious as well as the conscious.

We are learning to honor the non-rational as well as the rational, and the mystical as well as the intellectual.

The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who died in the mid 1980's, teaches us yet how to embrace the darkness so that the light will shine upon it and reveal to us the wonder and mystery of God-with-us.

Dr. Thurman knew darkness in his life. Born into poverty in 1900 in Daytona, Florida, he had deeply embedded in him the vitality of the light of the Spirit.

He experienced discrimination as an African American man. He lost his first wife to tuberculosis.

Even so he would say to us, look deeply for the light of God. Thurman wrote, "What is forgotten is that life moves at a deeper level than the objective and data of the senses. We are most alive when we are brought face to face with the response to the deepest thing in us to the deepest thing in life.

"Consider the hackneyed illustration of the beautiful sunset! We see the sunset, we recognize color, shape, the general quality of the atmosphere – to those we respond.

"Then when in the midst of all this, something else emerges – the sunset opens a door, in us and to us, of another dimension, timeless in quality that can only be described as ineffable, awe inspiring – then we know radical amazement....Spirit is met by Spirit and we are whole again." ⁱ

The Rev. Dr. Thurman was convinced that embracing the diversity of our humanity was the way to bring light to our darkness.

Those legendary foreigners from the East are our spiritual guides today. They crossed the boundaries of geography, ethnicity, class, economics, and religion to follow their star. We have all been given our own star or, better still, many stars to guide our way. The light has been placed within each of us, whether or not we know it or recognize it.

There is darkness in our lives, in our world, but against such a backdrop we can discern the twinkling of stars that give us hope. Darkness and light come as a pair. You can't have one without the other. It is not the darkness that we should fear, but rather our inability to see the twinkling light of Christ in the midst of the darkness.

It is Thurman who penned the familiar words based on Isaiah:

"When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart." ⁱⁱ

The work of Christmas awaits us...
the light beckons us...
Jesus Christ shows us...
God sustains us.

Light is a gift in darkness.
We need not be afraid.

ⁱ Howard Thurman, The Inward Journey, Meditations on the Spiritual Quest, 1961Harper & Bros. p. 19-20

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Thurman