

**Mind the Light**  
*Christmas Eve 2013*

I was the Associate Pastor at this church for 10 years before being appointed Senior Pastor another 10 years ago. So I know from personal experience that one of the downsides of being the Associate is that you usually are assigned the task of preaching on the weekend after Christmas. Now that's a great weekend for a worship service, everybody is relaxed, and happy, and all that – but practically speaking, it means, that the senior pastor can kick back on the days following Christmas, while the associate is in the office burning the midnight oil, writing a sermon! (We changed that this year in that we're very excited to give Jamel Flagg, a dynamic young man from our congregation with a call to ministry, an opportunity to preach his first sermon here, and he's been working on it since last November!)

But up until this year, for the past 10 years, that weekend has been Pastor HeyYoung's responsibility. Now (many of you know this already) HeyYoung is an excellent preacher, I enjoy her messages, and I *never* tell her what to preach. But, one day, a few years ago, she came to me and said, "Look... I don't mind preaching the weekend after Christmas, but I'm just telling you right now, I'm not going to preach on the Lectionary Gospel passage."

\*\* What she meant by that, you see, is that fairly often, the Lectionary reading for the weekend after Christmas is the passage from the second chapter of Matthew, the passage that describes the visit of the Magi and the response of King Herod to hearing the news of the birth of Jesus. I can certainly understand HY's reticence to having to think about that passage again and again.

It's a hard one. It describes King Herod's meeting with the Magi who have finally arrived in Bethlehem – something that, by the way, probably occurred *at least* a year after Jesus' birth. And they ask this man if he can tell them where to find the *new* king who has been born. Because, as they explain, 'We saw his star while we were in the east'.

Herod's response to their question was true to his character. See, Herod was a very bad man. King Herod was kind of like Joseph Stalin in that he had his favorite wife executed, as well as his brother-in-law, and even three of his own sons, because he thought they wanted his crown. His response to the Magi's inquiry was as predictable as it was heartbreaking. First, a deceptive lie: "When you find him, let me know where he is so that I can come and worship him, too."

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And when these righteous Magi see through his evil intentions, having seen Jesus, they go back home another way. When Herod realizes that he's been duped, in a terrible rage, he orders the execution of all the boys in Bethlehem and vicinity who were two years old or younger. That age span was to provide some margin for error, in case he had the exact timing wrong. The result was so horrible that Matthew can only report it by quoting the words of the prophet named Jeremiah:

*\*\*“A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more.”*

\*\* Anyone with any sensitivity feels uncomfortable with this story. Not only due to those very disturbing mental images of the “massacre of the innocents” (as it has come to be known) but also because of the ‘bigger picture issues’ that we grapple with upon further reflection. Joseph and Mary are warned in a dream of this coming calamity, and they hastily gather up their few possessions, and escape to Egypt. A long, hard journey at any time, but with a young child, even more difficult.

So, the ‘whole story’ of the first Christmas includes not only ‘Silent Night, Holy Night’, or ‘...how still we see thee lie’ - you know, the traditional Christmas card stuff - but also the soon-to-arrive soldiers with swords in the streets; mothers clutching their babies, hiding in the closets, trying not to breathe too loudly, and begging their children not to cry. As someone wrote, “There aren't many questions more impossible to answer than this one, ‘Why couldn't the angel have warned *them* too?’” Why is it that the birth of the new King not only didn't stop the suffering, but actually brought more to this earth? It's a confusing story, and it raises issues that we'd rather not think about at this 'most wonderful time of the year'.

\*\*It's not surprising that we want to skip this part of the story. There is just *one* Christmas Carol that I know of that depicts this event (the Coventry Carol). It's a beautiful and haunting tune, but the lyrics are rarely sung, and it's easy to understand why it's not in our hymnal. We don't want to think about this at *all*, let alone dwell on it at Christmas.

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But I'd like to suggest that perhaps that carol *should* be in our Christmas rotation, or maybe someone should write a new one for today's world. Because as difficult as it is to face, as much as we would prefer to leave King Herod out of the Christmas story, because we think we're supposed to keep the hardships of the 'real world' away from Christmas – because, we like to think that Christmas is only about joy, and happiness, and 'all is well.' We don't want to think of the Sandy Hook's (on screen) and suffering because Christmas is, 'God bless us, everyone', and all that...

I think that we need to understand that the Herod part of the story is actually pointing us to the very heart of the Christmas message. It is a stark, uncomfortable (and maybe therefore, unwelcome) reminder of why it is that the Almighty God - the Creator of all things - took on flesh, humbled himself and became 'one of us' ...a human being.

You see, Christmas is God's response to our sorrows.

In the prologue to the Gospel of John, we just heard read these words:

*\*\* In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

*\*\*Again, verse 5: The light shines in the darkness...*

Every true telling of the Christmas story admits that even in the midst of blinking decorations and flickering candles, darkness constantly threatens the light. The story of the Incarnation is set in the midst of an ancient struggle between good and evil, between darkness and light. This battle, this struggle, is not *incidental* to the story – it is the very point of the story! Ignoring the darkness is ignoring reality.

A pastor named Brett Younger shared this remembrance...

*\*\* Twenty-seven Christmases ago I was the new pastor of a Baptist church in Indiana. I decided we would have a Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion service—the first ever. I wanted everything to be perfect. It almost was. Snow fell that afternoon. A junior in high school, Melody, played "What Child Is This" on the flute. Three generations—a grandmother, her daughter, and granddaughter—lit the Advent candles. We sang the carols "O Come, All Ye*

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Faithful,” “Away in a Manger,” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” We read the story—Mary, Joseph, the baby, and the manger. I remember thinking: This is a Hallmark card of a worship service. *This is as picture-perfect a Christmas moment as any church has ever known.*

That’s when Danny’s beeper went off. Danny was a member of the volunteer fire department. When his beeper sounded—as it often did— Danny ran out of the sanctuary. We had gotten used to it, but it was still disconcerting. Then we started singing “Silent Night.” As we got to “Wondrous Star, lend thy light,” Danny ran back in and shouted that church member Bob’s mother’s house was on fire. Bob’s family ran after Danny. Danny’s wife got up and left.

Everyone had to choose between listening to the preacher’s sermon or slipping out one by one and going to a big fire. By the time I got Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the crowd— and I use that term loosely—was made up of those who were waiting for a ride home and those who had fallen asleep. That’s not how Christmas Eve Candlelight ... services are supposed to turn out! Tragedies should wait until January, because they don’t fit our ideas about Christmas. Well, that may be true, but they certainly fit God’s idea of Christmas.<sup>1</sup>

\*\* The reason there is Christmas is because God understands what it feels like to be human. Jesus -described by the prophet Isaiah - was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’ Just like us! The reason there is Christmas is because *no one* suffers without God’s awareness and God’s loving compassion. The reason for Christmas is that the human race needs to see with our own eyes what Love is really all about – because we have such distorted role models and images of love.

So God came down to us. He showed us that real Love is compassionate and kind. Real Love is a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good and even for those who will never even *try* to repay our kindness. God showed us in Christ that real Love cares about the living conditions of the poor, cares when people are hungry and cares for those in all types of prisons. Love shows us that God cares for those who are wondering if they will have a job next year, or if this latest medical diagnosis means that their end is near. (And real love shows us that the end of *this* world is not necessarily The End of our story!)

God came down to earth and showed us that Love is a willingness to forgive those who hurt us – because Love Incarnate in Jesus Christ was willing to die so that we ourselves might be forgiven.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/article/entry/4496/lets-keep-herod-in-christmas>

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Love came down at Christmas... love is the Light that shines in the darkness. And, (John writes) *The darkness has not overcome it.* It has not... but the battle still rages on.

The part of this story that we're used to leaving out—the sadness, suffering, and death—is most important. It's the hard part that explains why this child is a holy child.

When we remember the story, we need to remember all of the story. Because God still comes to the worst places and the most painful circumstances in this world: he comes to share our suffering, to care for us in the midst of tragedy. Christ has come to bear our sorrows. We have not been left alone.

This holy season is the promise that God's joy is deeper than our sadness, that ultimately life is more powerful than death, and a reminder that the light shines even in the darkness.

\*\* We've been reading a book together as a congregation during the season of Advent called "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam" by James W. Moore. Many of you then, may have read this week's chapter, which is called "*Mind the Light*". In that chapter Moore shares a powerful illustration there that I'd like to pass along to those who haven't yet read it.

\*\* It's a true story about a woman named Kate Walker who lived in the late 1800's.

"Kate was living in Sandy Hook, New Jersey, when she first met Jacob Walker. He was the keeper of the Sandy Hook Lighthouse. They fell in love, and they got married. She was so happy there at Sandy Hook because she and Jacob were in love and the lighthouse was on a beautiful spot on the mainland. In addition to helping him with the lighthouse, she also kept a garden and raised vegetables and flowers. It was a wonderful life.

\*\* But then, her husband was transferred to Robbins Reef, a lighthouse on a small island in the ocean and (obviously) surrounded by water. At first, she refused to unpack her trunks and boxes because she was upset about being so isolated. But over time, little by little she unpacked, arranged, decorated, and settled in. She loved Jacob dearly, and each day she helped him with the

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lighthouse duties to the point that she became as proficient at the job as he was. They both knew full well how the ships at sea depended on them. It was satisfying to know that in their work, they were saving lives daily by warning the ships of danger and guiding them to a safe harbor.

One day, Jacob caught a cold while tending the light. His cold turned into pneumonia. Eventually he became so ill that it became necessary to take him to the hospital where he could receive better care. But there was no one else to tend the light. He urged Kate to stay there at the lighthouse and continue his work. Of course, she wanted to go with him to the hospital, but he insisted that she stay behind to mind the light. Reluctantly, she agreed. His last words to her were, "Mind the light, Kate."

A few nights later, while Kate tended the light, she saw a boat coming. Something told her what news it was bringing. Somehow she knew something was wrong, and she braced herself for the news that reached her from the darkness: Her husband had died. After the funeral, Kate stayed on at the lighthouse. She was officially appointed as light-keeper by president Benjamin Harrison in 1809, four years after her husband's death - only after several men had turned down the job! (It was a different world in those days!)

These are Kate's poignant words: "Every morning when the sun comes up, I stand at the porthole and look towards [Jacob's] grave. Sometimes the hills are brown, sometimes they are green, sometimes they are white with snow. But always they bring a message from him, something I heard him say more often than anything else. Just three words: 'Mind the light!'"<sup>2</sup>

\*\* Moore concludes: "That story is something of a Christmas parable for us, isn't it? A strong message always seems to come to us when we look toward the manger in Bethlehem. From the manger of Bethlehem and from the empty tomb of Jerusalem come those three powerful words: "Mind the light!" That is, keep the light of Christ aglow in this word. Keep bright and clear and visible what Jesus stood for and lived for. Keep bright and clear and visible what he believed in and died for. Mind the light! Keep the light of Christmas burning." Again, James Moore writes:

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<sup>2</sup> *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam, James W. Moore, p 135-136, (and Wikipedia)*

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"Our job as Christians is to be reflectors of the light of Christ and to bring some measure of his light and life to dark corners of the world."

As we celebrate Christmas this year, it is our prayer that each one of us who finds Bethlehem will 'mind the light': in a world of darkness, God has called us to be the ones who carry his Love. We are the ones set apart to share the Light of Peace, the Light of Hope, the Light of Love."<sup>3</sup>

May the Light continue to shine in the darkness... through you. And through me as we declare to the world that Love has come!

\*\* video

[http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/42018/The-Real-Night-Before-Christmas?utm\\_source=whmsite&utm\\_medium=banner&utm\\_content=NOT-42018&utm\\_campaign=1PL](http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/42018/The-Real-Night-Before-Christmas?utm_source=whmsite&utm_medium=banner&utm_content=NOT-42018&utm_campaign=1PL)

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<sup>3</sup> *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam, James W. Moore, p 136.*