

It is no accident that Christmas comes so soon after the winter solstice. Pre-Christian celebrations often occurred on the darkest night of the year, the night before the world's turning and the gradual lengthening of days. It was the 3rd century when Christianity began the celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25th.

For those earlier religions the return of the sun ushered in the promise of another year, another yield of crops in the spring, the promise of food to eat and human survival. The ancients sang and danced to woo the return of light and life!

For early Christians, December 25th ushered in the possibilities of new life and new beginnings in the birth of the Christ-child. But what a way to usher in something new!? The story tells us that the divine chooses a teenage, unwed, peasant girl to be the bearer of light in the world. Lest Joseph get short shrift, we note that he does not abandon this young mother-to-be in spite of the neighborhood gossip within his close-knit community, in which one could expect to know only about 300 people in an entire lifetime. The first witnesses to the child were teenage shepherds; the birth was in a barn. Not exactly where one would expect such a profound event to take place. Jesus is born to the 99%! Perhaps the magi represent the 1%, wise enough to recognize that God's coming in the world includes everyone, the lowliest to the greatest. Jesus birth in a barn seems to say that there is no place or no one unworthy of the divine presence.

Last Sunday night I was at a party where one of my colleagues, Rev. Beth Bingham and I were comparing Christmas pageants. She said that during their pageant a funny and remarkable thing happened. As the girl playing Mary took baby Jesus from the manger to hold in her arms, another pageant participant quickly threw her stuffed Eeyore into the manger. The symbolism was not lost. Most of us have a little Eeyore in us--self doubt, sometimes the weight of the world upon us, the struggle to find our place in the world, even the unexpected delight that others would treat us so kindly. Yet, wherever we are on life's journey, we are welcomed to this manger.

During this Advent season I have pondered the paradoxical symbols of light and dark. Years ago in a class, a professor told a story describing a stark contrast between darkness and light and one of my student colleagues who was African-American objected to the symbolism. Why, she said, must darkness, blackness always be portrayed as scary and dangerous; bad men wear black hats; characters go over to the dark side; evil comes out in the dark of night. Since that class I've been particularly sensitive to the children whose skin is darker than mine. How does this paradox of dark and light feel to them when they hear our stories? That's one reason the book I read to the children tonight shows us a dark skinned baby -- more to the truth of Jesus' ethnicity.

Indeed, I have wondered: Could there be such a thing as too much light? I love to see the stars, and one reason Tom and I are going to the desert in a few days is because I want to see the myriad of stars that one can only see against the black velvet sky. I want to see stars impossible to see in the city flooded with manufactured, artificial light. John O'Donohue's book of poetic blessings, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, has this blessing: *For Light*.

Light cannot see inside things.
That is what the dark is for:
Minding the interior,
Nurturing the draw of growth
Through places where death
In its own way turns into life.

In the glare of neon times,
Let our eyes not be worn
By surfaces that shine
With hunger made attractive.

That our thoughts may be true light,
Finding their way into words
Which have the weight of shadow
To hold the layers of truth.

That we never place our trust
In minds claimed by empty light,
Where one-sided certainties
Are driven by false desire.

When we look into the heart,
May our eyes have the kindness
And the reverence of candlelight.

That the searching of our minds
Be equal to the oblique
Crevices and corners where
The mystery continues to dwell,
glimmering in fugitive light.

When we are confined inside
The dark house of suffering
That moonlight might find a window.

When we become false and lost
That the severe noon-light
Would cast our shadow clear.

When we love, that dawn-light
Would lighten our feet
Upon the waters.

As we grow old, that twilight
Would illuminate treasure
In the fields of memory.

And when we come to search for God,
Let us first be robed in night,
Put on the mind of morning
To feel the rush of light
Spread slowly inside
The color and stillness
Of a found world.

Might we tonight embrace both the darkness *and* the light as divine beauty? It is the darkness that makes our small candles visible. We may wonder if our small light, the divine seen in and through us, will be enough in our world. That Jesus is born in vulnerability, and humble circumstances, seems to say, “yes, whatever light we are able to shine will be enough for God’s purposes.”

There are a more than a few of us who welcome the chance to bid farewell to 2011. You know the litany of loss, anxiety, and fear that has gripped so many people in so many ways. Few have escaped. I see managers, secure in their own jobs, with great sadness, because though they may be secure, they are the ones laying off their employees. But tonight we come to renew our hope in new births, new beginnings.

God-in-Christ intends to reveal a “way out of no way.” The world into which this baby was born, the world of Roman occupation and soul-sickness, was not and is not God’s vision for creation, and our world today still falls short. The dream of God is wholeness and harmony and fullness of heart and soul and mind for everyone--all 100% of us. And tonight if we dare to pick up our candle, we are accepting the responsibility to be bearers of this light to the world.

Music often captures meaning better than just words so tonight I’d like to play a song for this season that has touched my heart: It is Mary Chapin Carpenter’s *Come Darkness, Come Light*.

(Slide show)

*Come darkness come light
Come new star shining bright
Come love to this world tonight.
Alleluia.*

Let us say our alleluias through the sharing of our gifts and offerings.