

Now occasionally preachers will tell a story that is apocryphal. That is a nice way of saying that the point is true, but the story ain't!

Years ago before there was electricity, and when doctors still made house calls, a certain Greenwood physician made a house call to a farm out in let's say Hodges. I was told this morning Hodges would be a good place. There would have been a farm there years ago. A frantic husband called him there whose wife was having a baby. He slipped and he slid down the muddy road and finally got there. He turned their bedroom into a delivery room. The husband was told by the doctor to hold the lantern way up high so he could see, and he did see, and he delivered a healthy baby boy. The man lowered the lantern, and then he wiped his brow. The doctor shouted, "Get that lantern up!" He delivered another baby, and this time it was a little baby girl. The father was shocked, but he wiped his brow, and he lowered the lantern. The doctor again said, "Get that lantern up!" He said, "We can't stop now. It looks like there's another one!" The shaky father looked back and forth, and he said, "Doc, do you think they're attracted to the light?"

I'll leave that burning. Light is a big part of the Christmas story. We're attracted to the light. We've added lights on every candlestick and every pew and candle. We've added lights to our Christmas tree and lights to the Advent wreath, and lights appear on every side. I don't think we've ever had more fire in the sanctuary at one time. I don't know if Terry Strange, our Fire Chief is here. I think we're okay.

The Christmas Story is full of light – the angels and the star and the light around the baby in the manger, and it's also full of darkness! A homeless family reduced to giving birth in a stable, a baby in a feeding trough, and then forced to run for their lives, to flee to Egypt just after. Poor shepherds, people whom no one thought was important, and wise men who aren't wise enough to see that Herod was not what he seemed. We can relate to the dark patches in this story. Mary's confusion, earlier in the chapter in Luke, where she says, "How can this be?" She wondered at what sort of greeting the angel was giving her. The shepherds shaking with fear, the King James Version says, "They were sorely afraid." The angels say, "Fear not, fear not!"

All of us at some time have been alone, afraid in the dark, wondering what might happen next, and some of us may, on the inside, feel that way right now. You know, it seems to me not just one at a time, but in a way, the whole world seems a little fearful right now, a little on edge. The world seems a little darker than it has at any other time in my life. We don't seem to know what's going to happen next or from where. Alone in the dark feels confusing to us. We can't see where we are going. Alone in the dark feels lonely to us. We wonder where our help or our comfort will come from. All of our instincts are to reach for the light. We think that will make things better. Well, maybe, maybe not. We may find it's not quite as simple as that.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, December 24, 2007

Light on its own solves nothing because all that turning on the lights does is reveal what is around you. When you see it, you still have to deal with it. The kind of light that we can shine on the world reveals, but it does not solve anything. The monster that lurked in the shadows might not be your imagination. What if there really is something there? Now you can see it, and you have to deal with it in the full glare of the light.

The decorations, the shiny lights, the shiny things, and the whole house of presents can't always shake that feeling that some of us have that there are patches of darkness, patches of loneliness in our lives. Lights may not help. Some things to be truthful look worse in the daylight! Then you have to deal with it. When you switch on the light, the challenges that you've been trying to ignore are still staring you in the face, then what?

We all like to think that we like the light, but in fact, sometimes if we're honest, we would rather be in the darkness because darkness is comfortable and ignorance is bliss. We can pretend there are no problems, and they'll just go away if we don't look at them.

Letting God's light shine into your soul takes a considerable act of courage. Sometimes we would rather stay in the dark – not know and not see. The light of Christmas, the light of Christ, changed the lives of those who saw it first. Their first instinct was to run away from it. The angels told the shepherds to fear not. The angels told Mary to fear not. It is big news, but it is good news. Who could be the same once they had seen it?

The shepherds, have you ever wondered what happened when they went back to their hillside? The light of the angels had changed their lives forever. Those stinky shepherds, not high on anybody's social list, unimportant people, but all at once, they became the very first to hear the good news that God Himself had come as the light, as the Savior into the darkness of our world. They then felt beloved. They were important to God, the first to hear the announcement of the birth of our Savior. How could they think of themselves or each other as they had before?

The Wise Men, drawn by the light of the star, discovered that all their expectations of what it meant to have power or to be a king, all those expectations were overturned! A king in a smelly stable – that wasn't how they imagined God would come into the world. What effect did that upset have on their thinking? God reveals power and influence in such unexpected ways! What kind of king gets born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough to the likes of Mary and Joseph? What of Mary and Joseph? Their lives had already been turned upside down. Though we think of Christmas as a time of joy and peace. It was a different experience for them I am sure!

Mary pondered, wondered in her heart what the angels meant, but ultimately she trusted God. Joseph first determined that he was going to have to divorce Mary, and then because of the dream and the message in the dream, decided no, I will trust God. In no time at all, they found themselves fleeing to Egypt as refugees because Herod was trying to murder their child. Through it all, they trusted God.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, December 24, 2007

Trusting God through the dark patches is really what this story of Christmas is all about. What has trusting God in the fact of uncertainty to do with the way we portray Christmas in advertising and media, in movies? Not very much. We see images of magic and sparkle. We see a dream world filled with happy families and plenty to eat and warm, bright, beautiful homes and decorations and fairy lights meant to make things look better than they really are. Christmas can, if you're not careful, easily become just a moment, just a sort of a speed bump escape from reality while we cover up the shabby paint work with tinsel or cover up the cracks in our personal lives with bright, festive clothes and in our society, through temporary generosity, and with pretend friendships and parties and expensive gifts and maybe a little spiked eggnog, and then it's over.

The Gospel view of Christmas is different and much, much more powerful. When Jesus is born, God turns on the lights, and He turns them up full, and reveals what is there in our lives and in the world. What a mess it sometimes is! He doesn't just spotlight our problems, no. If that were all that God did in Christ then we would have reason to despair. Beyond the uncomfortable truths, beyond the meanness, beyond the fear, beyond the guilt, beyond the brokenness that we cannot mend, Christmas reveals. Christmas reveals the most important truth of all. We are not helpless. We are not hopeless. God is with us. There with us as one of us and never leaving us is God. Not distant, far in Heaven, but a child in a manger, a friend by the lakeside, teaching and healing, and man on a cross suffering the injustice of the world and a risen Savior breaking through death and hopelessness to bring us new life.

So, in case you have turned off your ears, and thought I was preaching a Grinch sort of sermon, I am not. God has turned things upside down so we can light these lights, we can enjoy the decorations, we can see the reality of the world as it is and ourselves as we are and not despair because the world does not have the last word. Darkness and despair do not have the last word. Here among us is the God who will never leave us, who will never forsake us, a God who came to us that first Christmas day, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Present by spirit in this very moment, and that Word made flesh means I love you. Christmas means you are important. Christmas means you are loved. Christmas means you are not alone so you need not fear the dark. Christmas means you are forgiven so you need not fear the light.

Let me close with some words that you may have skipped over in the first part of the Gospel of John. So many people say well, there's no Christmas in the Gospel of John, but listen again, the Christmas message of a light in the darkness from John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." That's Christmas. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Amen, and celebrate with joy.