

January 7, 2024
“Guiding Light”
Matthew 2:1-18 / Mark 1:1-8
Pastor Tim

Those of you who've been in and around Philly for at least the past 22 years likely remember the old Sameric Theatre – the classic, art deco movie palace at 19th & Chestnut in Center City. It was gorgeous, the best place to see a movie hands down.

It opened Christmas Day, 1928, as the Boyd Theatre – complete with a towering outside sign that could be seen a mile away, an ornate, outdoor ticket booth, three-level foyer with two-story mirrors, an orchestra pit, pipe organ, and an auditorium – including a balcony – with room for almost 2,500.

When the Sameric Corporation bought it in 1971, they added three additional auditoriums. But it closed for good in 2002. And after several subsequent owners, a long legal battle and a fight to preserve it as an historic landmark, the theater was finally demolished in 2015. A sad day.

Now I share this little bit of Philadelphia history because I have a vivid memory of going to see “The Matrix” there. In the spring of 1999, way back in the 20th century (!), when it first came out, with all its hype. The theater was packed.

My friend and housemate, Rod, and I were late arriving so previews were done and the movie was just starting as we made our way down the aisle to find our seats.

Did I mention that it was packed? Naturally, there were NO seats anywhere near the aisles. And naturally, as far as we could see, no two seats together.

And it was dark. Really dark. If you know the movie, you know it's pretty darkly shot in general.

We finally spotted a couple of seats – in separate rows, of course, and both, OF COURSE, right in the middle of those rows. And as we turned to start the universally awkward dance of asking and immediately apologizing to folks to let us through, the scene shifted in the movie. The theater went from really dark to pitch black.

I mean, I couldn't see my hands in front of me – much less the row or the people or the seat I was after. I froze. I just stood there. Looking at the screen only to figure out how it could be THAT dark!

No aisle lights along the floor. Was that even legal? No light marking the theater entrance or even from the hallway because the entrance was down a back aisle.

And, you know, it was 1999 – so no cell phones. No light of my own to shed. Just complete darkness. Just for a few moments. It seemed like forever.

The experience, brief as it was, was surreal. It's like I was in the Matrix or something! Needless to say, I was SO relieved, SO grateful, for the return of at least a little bit of light to finally guide me to my seat.

I think I remember it so vividly because I have never – before or since – experienced complete, and particularly unexpected and unwelcome, darkness like that.

In the midst of these long nights of winter, on the heels of the winter solstice and the longest night of the year (at least in the Northern Hemisphere), we have come, friends, through a season – religiously, culturally – of celebrating light.

Diwali, back in mid-November – the Indian “festival of lights” celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains around the world, and as a national holiday in various South Asian countries. Marking the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil. Candles and clay lamps lighting up homes and streets to symbolically light up the night.

Hanukkah and the eight-day “festival of lights” in Judaism – commemorating the rebuilding and rededication of the ruined Temple in Jerusalem after a group of Jewish warriors, the “Maccabees,” defeated the occupying Greek armies. Celebrating, too, the triumph of light over darkness. Spirituality over materialism.

With menorahs, lit one candle at a time, one day at a time, for eight days, recalling that the Maccabees only had enough consecrated oil for one day – and yet, miraculously, the oil lasted for eight. Until they were able to secure more.

Christmas, of course, in which we celebrate both the coming of Jesus as light of God, Emmanuel, in our midst, AND the promised coming of God's kingdom as light of an altogether new world. A kingdom toward which we are called to add our lights.

Kwanzaa, December 26th to January 1st, the week-long celebration of African American culture based on African harvest festival traditions. With kinaras lit one candle at a time, one day at a time, for seven days; the seven candles – three red on the left, three green on the right and one black in the middle – representing the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa.

And now Epiphany, also known as “Theophany” in the Eastern Church, officially observed yesterday, January 6th, the day following the 12-day season of Christmas.

Epiphany celebrating the light of God's presence revealed, shown forth in Jesus – both human AND divine, mirror to our humanity AND window to God.

Revealed to the gentile sages (*magi* in the original Greek). Likely Zoroastrian astronomers from Persia, present-day Iran. And decidedly not kings, as the song suggests.

And revealed more widely through Jesus' baptism, during which Jesus is announced as beloved Son of God, and through Jesus' first miracle – turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

A season celebrating, claiming light IN THE MIDST of darkness.

The prophet Isaiah declares, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the HOLY ONE has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the HOLY ONE will arise upon you and God's glory will appear over you.”

Or as “The Message” translation puts it, “Get out of bed ... Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight. God's bright glory has risen for you. The whole earth is wrapped in darkness, all people sunk in darkness, but God rises on you, God's sunrise glory breaks over you.”

The Psalmist faithfully and famously asserts that “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you (God) are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

And the author of John’s gospel poetically proclaims that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

In the midst of the darkness of our lives and of the world around us, which can happen so fast, so unexpectedly, we assert our faith, our hope, our resilience, that the darkness will not overtake the light. Not completely. Not ever.

Evil WILL not overtake goodness. Fear and hate WILL not overtake love. Death, as demonstrated through the cross and the empty tomb, WILL not overtake life.

We claim such holy light to guide us through the darkness. And bring us into the light. Like these sages, magi, traveling a great distance to find the baby Jesus, the one they say is “born king of the Judeans.” Because they “saw his star at its ascent.”

The story is wrapped in mystery and intrigue. These sages are, in fact, astronomers – reading the stars, following the light where it leads them in the midst of night’s darkness. And note that they are foreigners. It is foreigners, outsiders in every way, who know and show the way (though not to Herod, as we heard in our reading – warned in a dream to return home another way).

God is full of surprises, amen!

The sages don’t make a beeline to Bethlehem, where Jewish prophecy suggests a new ruler will be born – hence the political threat to Herod, the already self-declared “king of the Judeans,” and his ensuing instinct for horrific violence to suppress the threat and maintain his abusive power. Darkness of an altogether different kind.

They don’t use a map.

They follow a star, “going before them until it stopped over the place where the child was.” And rejoicing when it does.

Holy light to guide them, and all of us, ALL of us, through darkness and into the light.

Jesus, again, as One (and to be clear, not the ONLY one) who so powerfully manifested, showed forth the light of God – and ultimately guided and guides all who would follow to the light of God's kingdom and the light of an altogether new world. Herod, and all the powers that were in Jerusalem with him, were right to feel threatened.

Biologically speaking, of course, we need light to survive. To live. To thrive. The same is true spiritually.

Complete darkness leads to literal and spiritual death. But so would complete light. Light is not inherently good, and darkness not inherently bad. Look no further than the Genesis account of Creation. It's all good.

We rightly acknowledge the duality of light and dark, literally, naturally – that one cannot exist or be experienced without the other. Of course we can't know light without the darkness, day without night, and vice versa. We, like all living things, need both.

But I reject, metaphorically speaking, the false and often loaded duality of light and dark; light as necessarily opposed to darkness. Light as a symbol for all that is good, and dark as a symbol for all that is not.

That's the false duality that inspired European colonialists to arrogantly, self-righteously and self-servingly justify, in the name of God, the invention of whiteness, the invention of white supremacy racism. And to be clear, there is no other kind.

Light skin became WHITE skin, evidence of goodness and superiority, justification for privilege and power; darker skin became Black skin, evidence of depravity inferiority, justification for punishment and powerlessness. Slavery. Genocide. Oppression. Injustice and inequity compounded through generations. Continuing, of course, to this day.

We reject that false duality, and we – especially those of us who benefit from it – must reject its destructive legacy.

And so while we often find – including in the Bible and other sacred texts – and may ourselves use, the metaphor of darkness to describe evil or injustice or violence or sin, to rightly distinguish between good and evil, we have to tread lightly – acknowledging that darkness, like light, exists within all of us. Literally and metaphorically, we are all of us a mix of light and dark.

We also use the metaphor of darkness to describe the experience of our own or others' pain and suffering, hopelessness and despair, disconnection and isolation. Often unexpected and unwelcome. But, in faith and hope, we affirm that darkness, too, CAN be life-giving.

That doesn't mean that what we witness and experience as darkness somehow happens for a reason, to fulfill some divine purpose, just that God can also be found in the darkness. Because, as the Psalmist reminds us, there is no where we can go from God's spirit.

Psalm 139: "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

And so we trust, in faith, with resilience and with active hope, that divine light and life and love find a way where no way seems possible. We trust, as the Sikh activist Valarie Kaur asserts, that the darkness of what may feel in our lives or in the world around us like a TOMB, may actually be the darkness of a WOMB.

Not the end of life but the beginning, the birthing, of new life. Not complete and permanent darkness, but movement toward light and life.

That is the faith we celebrate, and the Way we seek to follow, through the arc of Jesus' birth and life and death and new life. Spirit rising, from the cradle to the cross to the perpetual call to let our own lights shine.

A light – a GUIDING light – shines in the darkness, including our own, and the darkness did not and will not overcome it. Like the sages traveling through the desert, may we

study the stars. May we look out in the midst of the darkness for those holy stars to guide us. May we follow, as author Anne Lamott suggests, “a brighter light than the glimmer of (our) own candle.”

Divine light guiding us, again and again and again, into the light of love and life. That we, too, and together, may be lights the world so desperately needs.

May it be so.