

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)

Or, as my Jewish Publication Bible translates: "...the people that walked in darkness have seen a *brilliant* light; on those who dwelt in a land of gloom, light has *dawned*."

This seems like the right place to begin on this particular Christmas Eve. The second half of Advent was a memorable time for this community and the surrounding towns from which we come. In the early morning hours on Friday, December 12 it got pretty dark around here following a night of cracking trees and limbs crashing to the ground. At 2 a.m. my son James got a text message from a friend that a tree was poking into his bedroom. I would learn a day or two later that another parishioner had a tree in her living room and of others whose cars were wrecked. All of us who were affected have our own stories that will no doubt become part of local lore, stories we will tell our children and grandchildren.

It was the best of times and the worst of times and as such it brought out both the best and worst in people—in us. For a time, it was a lovely and romantic adventure. In our house we played Monopoly on Friday by candlelight and then huddled by a crackling fire later that evening. On Saturday night at 5 pm twenty-two brave souls gathered here in a cold, dark church and lit the third (rose) candle on our Advent wreath. The prophet and the psalmist and St. Paul all told us to "rejoice," and so we did. Power was restored to the church early on Sunday morning when we gathered at 8 o'clock and 10 o'clock to rejoice some more. It was now clear that many of us (including the rector and his family) were still without power, and that it would be a while before we would have it again.

We lived for a little while in a land of deep darkness. Adventure gave way to nuisance and romanticism gave way to anxious waiting. At the rectory it wouldn't be until 5:32 pm on Thursday night, a full week of darkness that started to feel like "a land of gloom." Standing at a makeshift shelter at the Senior Center or at the Big Y people could talk only about one thing: when would power be restored? When would the light shine again in the darkness? At least in Holden, I was told yesterday that it looked like the light would shine in the darkness of every home by today. I hope that proved to be the case.

I am told that if past history is an accurate indicator there will be a spike in births come the middle of September. Time will tell, but what I began to think about during that third week of Advent was what it would be like to be giving birth to your first-born child (or any child) in mid-December 2008 in central Massachusetts. What would it be like to have the recently-painted nursery go dark? What would it be like to put your child into a brand new car seat and have your house holding steady at 37 degrees? You can either go home to a cold dark house or bunk at a make-shift shelter or try to check into a hotel an hour from here—*if* you can find an inn that has room for you. It isn't quite so romantic when you think of it that way, at least not for me. In fact it's a little scary, or as Jill said this past weekend, *messy*. And that indeed is the point, because the Incarnation *is* messy.

Maybe last weekend was even scarier if you found yourself at the other end of life's journey. What was it like to be in a wheelchair or bed-ridden or at home with hospice in the end stages of cancer, or dependent on oxygen during this time of being powerless? One new friend I made standing at the deli at Big Y was telling me about her husband who was in just such circumstances. She looked tired and worn out, way more than I was. *O come, O come Emmanuel*, I thought (but did not sing.)

Most of us could (and did and *should*) imagine circumstances far worse than those we faced last week. If our home wasn't damaged, we could look to those who had trees poking through. But if we had trees poking through, we could still imagine things being worse: "at least no one was hurt, it could be worse." It is, I think, a part of human nature and a way that we get through tough times. It wasn't Katrina, after all, and we weren't refugees trying to escape from Afghanistan; nor was it a military overthrow of the government. Even in these darkest days most of us were not in danger of dying. We were inconvenienced to be sure and it was hard, but most of us remained pretty confident that life would return to normal within days or weeks at least.

I've heard the Christmas story my whole life and preached on it for the past fifteen years or so. It is a story we may know too well, however, and therefore we sometimes see it with old eyes and hear it with old ears, expecting nothing new. Every first-year seminarian has the experience of being shown by a New Testament professor that there is no innkeeper mentioned in this story. Nor is there any mention of a stable or of cattle lowing. That isn't done to destroy faith but as a step toward *rediscovering* good news within the narrative that Luke offers to the Church. It's intended, I think, as a way of shaking us out of our complacency in order that we might see and hear again. What the text says, simply, is that...

...while they were there [i.e. in Bethlehem] the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

A manger is basically a feeding trough. So one can make all kinds of assumptions—maybe the manger was kept in a stable and there were animals in there or maybe someone went out into the barn and found a manger and brought it to a warmer place as a make-shift crib. We don't know for sure because Luke is either reticent to share those details with us or doesn't know them. All we do know is that the time came for her to deliver her child and it didn't go according to plan; or at least not according to *their* plans.

When you clear away the innkeeper and the stable and the animals (and the little drummer boy banging on his drum!) what is left in Luke's story are two young parents and their first-born child wrapped up in a blanket and lying in a feeding trough (and without a generator.) I imagine that this didn't feel like an adventure, and that they were more than a little bit scared, not only because parenthood is always a little scary but because they had been dislocated. Because they were away from home and utterly dependent upon the good will of strangers. That's how Luke tells it anyway. In Matthew it's even more frightening: Jesus and his parents become refugees who flee to Egypt after King Herod learns of this birth and wants to kill him.

This Advent I found myself not just talking about waiting, but really waiting. I found myself unprepared in a season when we talk a lot about preparation. But I also found myself rejoicing even in the midst of crankiness and frustration. As I pondered this Christmas story anew, I found myself thinking about parents with a newborn child not in a time and place far away in a little town of Bethlehem, but here and now in a little town called Princeton or Holden or Rutland or Sterling or Paxton. And yet in such circumstances, I could imagine people from all walks of life reaching out with small acts of random kindness. I could imagine it because I experienced it: a neighbor who offers a generator after his power is restored; an electrical engineer who wires it up so that there is (for hours at a time) both heat and light.

And I can (because of these recent experiences) actually imagine a shepherd offering simple gifts of an extra blanket or some goat cheese, or kings setting out on a journey with only the stars to guide them. And while it's a bigger stretch for

me, I can even almost imagine a little drummer boy with no gift to bring but his steady and slightly annoying rum-pa-pum-pumming.

If it all happens only in a “little town” far, far away in the Middle East, and a long time ago then it too easily becomes a fairy tale: a “once upon a time” story that we tell little children. But the claim of the Incarnation is that Christ *is* born: *il est ne, le divin enfant*. Ultimately the birth of Jesus is about what happens in *this* little town, and about the amazing resourcefulness of both human beings and of God. It’s about the light shining in the darkness of our lives, meeting us where we are. It is about God-with-us, God among us and through us in surprising and wonderful ways—the gift of God’s self-emptying love revealed here and now.

A people who dwell in deep darkness learn to pray again, if only for a little while, not just for their own needs—“O, Lord, please let *us* have lights again!” But also:

- Be with those who are worse off than I am tonight, especially those who are depressed or anxious or fearful or angry;
- Be with those for whom having power restored doesn’t do anything about the fact that they haven’t got the resources to fill the oil tank and help us to be neighbors to them;
- Be with town workers and civil servants, especially those who are out in the cold at 6 a.m. and not arriving home until way past dark in order to restore power for others;
- Be with those young kids serving in the National Guard and cleaning up the maze;
- Be with those being born; and be with those dying.

The good news we proclaim here tonight is not that “*once upon a time*...the light shone in the darkness.” It is that here and now in *this* time and *this* place the light *shines* in the darkness; and the darkness has not overcome it. On *this* holy night, Jesus is born again.

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