

## The Light Still Shines

Matthew 2: 1-8

Dec. 27, 2009

A few weeks ago, some of the young adults and I went over to Pacific Beach to give out sandwiches and blankets to the homeless. It was a cold, rainy day and while I didn't really want to be out in that kind of weather, I went, remembering that the people we were going to see didn't have a lot of choice about being outside.

Sometimes people who have no home to go to can find warmth in a shelter for the night, but many shelters require them to leave during the day. They may be able to gather enough money for a cup of coffee, but MacDonald's or Burger King or other places won't let them stay very long.

Soon, they have to go back outside, no matter what the weather is like.

A while back, there was a picture on the front page of the LA Times. The picture showed a little boy in a wagon with kind of miscellaneous people in the edges and background of the picture.

The caption explained that this two-year-old boy in a wagon was being pulled along skid row in LA by his father. His mother was also there. A homeless family.

It reminded me of what I learned in a class on urban ministry a few years ago. As we walked the streets of skid row we heard that many people who live on the streets are women and children. And yet when we think of homeless people, we think almost exclusively of men, and sometimes older perhaps mentally ill women, but hardly ever do we think of young women and children. Or families. The most dangerous times for them come at night. Huddled under cardboard tents, lined with newspapers and blankets when they can be found, these people, these men, women, children, face danger from other people who live on the streets, and from other people who prey on those who are weaker.

Especially the women and children.

Even in the shelters, even when there is an effort made to protect them, women and children can become victims. There is only so much protection possible when people share bathrooms and dark hallways.

And out on the streets, what kind of protection is possible at all?

Homeless. In the dark. No lights to turn on to eliminate the hiding places of a dark night.

Not safe. Not secure. There is no place like home, as Dorothy says. Home would be safe. You can turn on the lights when you get home. But when there is no home to go to, dark nights can be long and scary and dangerous.

But, you know, even though I have a home where I feel safe, sometimes the world itself seems dark and dangerous. And I wish that someone would turn on the lights.

I wish the darkness would go away when I read about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with more casualties, more amputees, more traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

I wonder where the light is for people who are victims of huge earthquakes and tsunamis, of hurricanes and huge wildfires. Disasters that leave thousands homeless and in the dark.

I wonder where the light is for people who are victims of terrorist acts and kidnappings and domestic violence and for people who are in grief and those who are in constant pain and those who are depressed.

The world is a very dark place sometimes.

And many times I have to ask, because it's so hard to find---

Where is the light? Where is the hope? In this world where we face so many huge, seemingly insurmountable problems? Where poverty and disease and pollution and natural disasters

And greed and selfishness and political power run everything, at the expense of human lives?

Where people we love leave us and we feel so alone?

We may have homes, at least for now, but how many of us are living in a very dark, a hopeless place? How dark is our world?

Our scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew wrote this book in response to what was happening in the world around him at the end of the first century, to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to the new generation of Jewish Christians, people who had not been born yet when Jesus Christ was walking among people.

The Romans had destroyed the Jewish temple and the Jewish Christians had been kicked out of the synagogues. They were being persecuted by both the government and by the Jewish religious establishment.

And in addition to these threats from outside, the church was divided within. Some Christians believed that Christ had only appeared to be human, but was actually spirit and not flesh.

Some believed that he was created by God, the first of creation, but not actually God. There were other disagreements as well, threatening to split the church in a very dangerous time.

There were many questions about people who were not Jewish coming to believe in Jesus Christ. Questions about whether Christians needed to follow the Jewish dietary laws, about circumcision, about Jewish Christians associating with gentiles. Things were getting confusing and complicated as the church began to grow.

The world must have seemed very dark to the early Christians as it does sometimes to us. Without the Jewish Law, without their ancient traditions, without a temple, without synagogues, the Jewish Christians must have felt very uneasy, very uprooted.

They might have felt homeless and in the dark.

Matthew had to remind the people that the Light of the World had come to them! And not only to them, but to the entire world.

And so he recorded the story of the magi coming from the east, wise men who were not Jewish, but probably Persian. They had come quite a distance following a star.

The star had shone in Bethlehem on a dark night, and the magi had seen it. They believed that it announced the birth of a new king of the Jews. They first looked for him in Jerusalem, in the palace, where it would seem to make sense to find a new-born king.

Instead of Jerusalem, Jesus was born a few dozen miles south, in Bethlehem, a very small town hardly worth noticing.

Instead of a palace, he was born in a stable. Instead of a bed, he slept in a manger. Instead of servants to take care of him, he was surrounded by animals.

He didn't have a home. Not when he was born in a stable. And not later in his life when he traveled around the countryside preaching and teaching. Jesus is quoted as saying, "the birds of the air have nests but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Nowhere to lay his head-----homeless. In a world that did not know him, did not welcome him, did not comprehend him.

In a dark world in need of the light that only he could give, and yet, he was not received, not recognized. But despite this lack of recognition of who Christ is, the star that shone over Bethlehem to announce his coming still shines today. Scripture tells us that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

The darkness has not overcome the light. It cannot overcome the light!

Not in Jesus' lifetime, when the darkness did its best to kill him.

Not at the end of the first century, when fears of rejection and persecution from outside and divisions from within threatened the church.

Not even at the darkest moments of our history has the light of the world, Jesus Christ, been overcome.

It has been said that a single candle has the power to dispel the darkness. The darkness may be bigger, but the candle stays lit. And from one candle many flames may be lit.

At the end of the first century, the church read the words of Matthew. The church continued on, despite the darkness of the world around it. The light of Christ not only continued, it grew! And it spread further, among more people.

And in our dark, sometimes hopeless world, the light of Christ continues to shine as well.

The young mother on skid row could very easily have been overwhelmed by being homeless and having a little child. Instead the light shines in her optimistic words that she and her family will get off skid row and have a home again.

The light also shines in the world in other ways. When a soup kitchen in Santa Ana burned to the ground recently, donations and offers of help poured in.

When the Philippines flooded a few months ago, help poured in, including help from members of this church.

When tragedy strikes anywhere, there are always people willing to help and do whatever they can.

And when people are hungry and cold, sometimes other people come and offer sandwiches and blankets.

The light still shines.



It shines in us whenever we act as the Body of Christ, whenever we live as the hands and feet of Christ.

Jesus told us that WE are the light of the world and that we should not hide that light under a bushel basket.

The light shines. It shines on us and it shines through us. And the light is hope, the hope that is the peace of Jesus Christ.

I want to tell you about a woman I used to work with. When I was the Director of Children's Ministries at Laguna Country United Methodist Church, this woman was the nursery caregiver. She did a wonderful job taking care of the little ones and teaching them that God loves them. She laid a strong foundation for the Sunday School teachers to build on when the children got older and moved to the next room.

The light shined through her. In her arms the babies and toddlers felt the love of God in a very real, tangible way. At that age, the physical reality of love is all that makes sense. Actually, to all of us at every age, the tangible, visible reality of love is all that we really truly understand.

The Christmas that I was working with her, she gave me a gift and wished me Merry Christmas.

We had a wonderful conversation that made me feel I was with a true sister. I asked about her holiday traditions as I gave her a gift and I wished her “Happy Holidays.”

Why would I say “happy holidays” and not “Merry Christmas”?

Because Mahboubeh is from Iran. A Muslim.

Between the two of us sisters that day, the light of the world lit our faces and warmed our hearts. And I felt at home. Welcomed. Safe.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not comprehend it, does not overcome it, does not put it out.

We do not always understand the light, but we can try to.

And in this light, in Christ who is the light of the world, I find peace, I find hope, I find love and joy.

I find home.

Where does the light of the world shine for you? Where do you see the glory of Christ and begin to understand what God is like?

In your family? In your friends? In nature? In your own heart?

Find the light of the world in your life. Jesus Christ still shines. The darkness may be big, but God is bigger.

The light shines in you and in me, and in every part of creation, and in everyone who knows God.

Someone near to you needs to see light, to feel at home in a dark night, to know that the light still shines. Can you be that light? Can the light of Christ shine through you?

Can we be the light of the world for each other and for the dark world around us?

May we be the light of the world!

May 2010 be the year of light for everyone, everywhere!

Amen!