

Walking in Light

January 2, 2011---Epiphany

Have you ever been in a cave? There are some very famous caves, like Mammoth Cave in Kentucky and Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Maybe some of you have visited them. Maybe some of you have been in other, lesser-known, caves as well

When I was young we often explored caves on our vacations. I have been in caves from Kentucky to Missouri to New Mexico, and all up and down Oregon and California.

I love caves!

The more famous caves have lights and you can see where you're going easily. But most of the caves that I've been in haven't been lit. When you go down into them, you have to carry a lantern or a flashlight to find your way. Once you get underground, it can be disorienting. It's pitch black outside of that circle of light that you're carrying.

Underground, you can lose your sense of direction and it can be hard to find your way out again. If you get separated from other people, it can feel like you will never get out of the cave, especially if you don't have your own flashlight or if the battery goes dead.

And, yes, that happened to me.

My family was in a cave in northern California. We each had our own flashlight, and I left the others to explore a side tunnel. I was having a great time until the batteries in my flashlight died. As the light grew dim, I turned back to get to the main passageway to get to my family,

But the light didn't last long enough, and I was soon alone in the dark, trying to feel my way along the wall.

The floor was uneven and I stumbled. In places the ceiling was low and I bumped my head. I stayed quiet, knowing my brothers would give me a hard time if they knew how scared I was, but it really wasn't long before panic set in.

Struggling to control my voice, I called out to my dad. "I need a light here!"

“Where are you?” His voice came back. I could see exactly nothing, but at least I could hear him!

“I’m here!” I said, not being at all helpful.

He said, “I’m coming. Keep talking.”

And I did, and he did. I saw the light from his flashlight come around the bend, and I started moving again. I followed that light back to the safety of my dad’s presence, back to hope and love.

After being lost in the dark, I found my way back by following the light.

Sometimes life is like that. We can be lost in the darkness of our lives, caught up in trying to get ahead, making more money, buying more stuff, getting the next promotion, finding the best paying job even if it means giving up what makes us happy, even if it means not seeing our family much.

We can get lost in the darkness of power, greed, and selfishness and lose the love of our families, our friends, and even ourselves.

We can get trapped by fear, unable to find our way out, believing that everyone is out to get us, that there is a conspiracy out there to take away our freedom, our money, our health, everything that is important to us.

Fear steals the light from our lives, leaving us in the dark. We might not even notice that life is getting dimmer until we are too far down a side tunnel holding a flashlight with dead batteries. And then, in the darkness, panic sets in and we can't move.

Fear of being alone, of being hungry or sick or homeless. Fear of wasting our lives. Fear that no one loves us. Fear that everyone we love will go away or die and leave us alone. Fear that we're not good enough or smart enough or capable enough to do what we dream of doing.

Darkness can creep up on us or it can smack us down hard. It can seem like there's no way back to the light and joy and hope and peace that we once knew.

And when that happens, we need help, just like I did in the complete darkness of that cave.

Reading the passage from Matthew about Herod and the wise men, it strikes me that the wise men were following the light of a bright star, walking at night, in the darkness, but they were always heading for that star's light.

King Herod, on the other hand, was not following the light of the star. By all indications, he didn't even see the star. And while the wise men were excited enough to follow the light of the star and were overwhelmed with joy to find the baby king, Herod's emotions were quite different.

Herod was not happy or excited. He was afraid. In the darkness of that fear, that self-centeredness and greed, all he could think of was protecting his own power, his own position. He didn't want to be replaced by a new king.

And so he plotted to find the baby later and have him killed.

He wanted the wise men to return to him to tell him where to find Jesus, but they had a dream that warned them away from going back to Herod, so they went home by another road, a road that did not go through the darkness of Herod's fear. Instead it was a road lit by the light and love of God.

When Herod knew that he couldn't be sure of finding the right baby, he made sure he wouldn't lose his throne to this new king by having all of the babies born in that area during that time period slaughtered.



All of the innocent little boys of Bethlehem were drawn into the darkness that was Herod's fear and greed and selfishness, and their families were plunged into the darkness, too, as they grieved the loss of their little ones.

Darkness spreads quickly.

Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience and they must have heard this story from a different point of view than we do.

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Matthew's first readers must have been at least a little bit shocked to hear this, but then they also knew that some of their own friends and relatives did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah, and they also probably knew that the good news was already spreading among gentiles.

But the words about Herod would not have surprised them at all. King Herod and his sons, including the King Herod who later beheaded John the Baptist, were well-known as ruthless, hateful, evil rulers, puppets of the Roman government who abused their power to get whatever they wanted.

The darkness associated with King Herod was clear to the Christians of the first century and it is clear to us 20 centuries later. The light associated with the star that showed the wise men the way to Jesus stands in clear contrast to that darkness, then and now.

The light of Christ shines in the darkness of our lives, and the darkness never has and never will overcome it!

When we fall into darkness, when we let fear and greed and selfishness overcome us, we can find ourselves unable to find our way out. Armed with only our own flashlight whose batteries are dying, we are lost in the darkness that surrounds us. If we are afraid to call out for help, afraid to be seen as weak or incompetent or needy, we may never see light, we may never know love or hope or joy again.

But if we call out, "Help me, help me, help me," then soon we will see a light, the light of Christ, coming to find us, coming to lead us back to where we can once again find ourselves loved and wanted and encouraged and capable, back to where we can see all of the colors of God's beautiful creation,

We can follow the star that leads us out of the darkness to find the Light of the World.

How do we live in the light? By listening when the angels say, "Be not afraid." By calling out to God, "I need a little light here!" By knowing that perfect love casts out all fear, and that God loves us with that perfect love. By looking for the star that leads us to the light of the world. By allowing God to lead us in the footsteps of the wise men to kneel before Jesus, who is our savior.

This happens in our hearts, but it is lived out in our lives. When we live in darkness, we are focused on ourselves, on our own needs and desires. We are afraid to give away anything we have or any part of ourselves because maybe that will mean there won't be enough left for us---whether it's money or time -----or love!

When we live in darkness, we cannot see others the way that they are, the way that God sees them---as beloved children of God! When we live in darkness, we can keep our distance. Somehow they are not as deserving or as needy as we are. Somehow we cannot serve them and love them because we just can't see them well enough to know what to do for them or to know how to show them the love of God.

But when we live in light, what a difference! In the light, we can see to find other people where they are, we can see them as they are, we can know what they need and we can see that God loves them, that God created them, and ourselves! As beloved children! All of us sisters and brothers in Christ!

Don't live in the darkness. Do not be afraid. Call out from the pitch blackness of your fear, "Help me, help me, help me!" and let God lead you out of the cave of hopelessness and meaninglessness that has overwhelmed you.

Live following the light of the star, coming to find the newborn king, and offer to him the gifts of your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength. And you will go on your way, like the wise men did, going home by another road, a road that does not travel through the darkness, a road that is lit by the love and hope of Jesus Christ.

Amen!