

Love's Action in the Light, Darkness and Fire

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St. David's Episcopal Church

A few weeks ago I went on a pre-ordination retreat to Holy Cross Monastery in the Hudson Valley. I was pondering the various elements of Epiphany as they are celebrated at St. David's and found Holy Cross' motto or mission statement brought together all the elements we celebrate today: Love must act as light must shine and fire must burn.

I was so inspired by this Epiphany idea, love, light, and fire, that I wrote a hymn text, which will be performed tonight at the 5 o'clock service by our talented Kim Robson and Elaine Sonnenberg to the tune of Here I am, Lord. But this week, reflecting on the Feast of the Holy Innocents and the death of one of St. David's young parishioners, I realized something.

Before we can delve into the light, the fire, and the love of Epiphany, there's an element that I (and the monks of Holy Cross) forgot.

Darkness. The darkness must be honored.

Love must act as light must shine and fire must burn and darkness must be honored.

Gregory of Nyssa and many mystics throughout the centuries have reflected on darkness as a key to spiritual growth and depth. Sometimes it's called apophatic theology, but it is as biblical of theology as theology that focuses on God as light. For

example, God meets Moses in the light of the burning bush fire, but God also meets Moses in the darkness of night. Our Isaiah passage talks about God in the midst of darkness and light.

Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, which I read a few years ago and then gave to a struggling friend. Taylor writes about learning things in the dark that she could not have learned in the light. She concludes that we need darkness as much as the light. That is something we need to hear, especially when faced with loss, tragedy, things we often call darkness. Because in the midst of the darkness, God is present.

The story of the Magi really only makes sense if we pay attention to the darkness and what it reveals. The Magi, sometimes translated as wise men, are sages, astronomers or astrologers, possibly Zoroastrian priests or religious leaders and included men and women, were a class of people who studied the darkness and the stars. If you are an amateur star-gazer or know someone who is an astronomer, you know this is time-consuming and slow even with the best of telescopes. Just imagine having no such technology as you studied the stars and charted the constellations by hand, by candlelight or oil lamp. In many of our nativity sets, the star that led the Magi is huge and bright. But to the naked eye, a star or even a planet is a tiny dot in the midst of a huge blackness. The Magi, the Wise Ones, were practiced at paying attention in the dark.

A tiny light in a huge dark sky leads them first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

But those whom the Wise Ones meet respond very differently to this epiphany, this ah-ha moment of the Magi. We hear that the Magi met King Herod and chief priests and scribes and even that “all of Jerusalem was frightened” by the question from the Magi.

King Herod might be excused for his inability to look up and study the stars—he was too busy murdering people and grabbing power for himself and kissing up to the Roman bigwigs. But what about the priests and scribes and leaders in the Jewish faith—they must have looked up at the same night sky, but why don't they understand the meaning of the star? Are they not paying attention? Are they afraid of the dark and what it might say to them?

Did some of the people of Jerusalem or other places notice the same star and follow it like the Magi from the East? I love a children's book by Mary Hoffman called *Three Wise Women* that chronicles the gifts a maiden, a mother, and an elder bring from three edges of the world to the Christ child. It reveals how Magi might be religious leaders in Persia with fancy gifts for a king, but Magi might also be grandmothers telling stories and paying attention to the darkness.

Only when we honor and acknowledge the dark can we understand how light must shine.

The star had to shine and it would have shined no matter if anyone was paying attention. The nature of light is to shine even when the darkness is so expansive. This week as I was contemplating loss and tragedy, I looked up the obituary of the young

person St. David's lost last week and all I could find online for Zac was a few lines from *The Little Prince* about stars and laughter and shining in the night sky.

Jesus is often called the Light of the World. Jesus is the bright morning star. And the star in Matthew's story lives into the fullest of its nature, giving light to reveal the Light of the World. But we only see it if we look into the darkness. We can sometimes see the moon in daylight, but most stars are completely hidden from our sight. The Magi, and we, following in their paths, must pay attention to the seasons of light and darkness in our lives. When we honor the darkness and the light, we can come with faith to the fire that burns.

Tonight over in the fairgrounds, we will gather together after the 5 pm chapel service to burn trees as another tangible way to reflect on light being revealed and made known to us. One of the main symbols of the Holy Spirit is fire. Mystics such as Catherine of Siena reflected on the Divine Fire. She wrote, Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.

Fire is also an important element in the Easter Vigil, with a fire lit outdoors to be brought into the dark church. The fire of Easter Vigil only is visible in the darkness. Fire appears again in the flames of fire that came down on the disciples in Pentecost.

Today, Epiphany, we reflect on what needs to get purged or burned up. We reflect on the darkness and how light shines even in the darkest of nights.

The burning or lighting of trees historically was done at the darkest moment in winter, at the winter solstice or the longest night, and was thus a fitting time to celebrate

the birth of the Savior: As our Isaiah passage says, Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

We can shine with the light of Christ to a dark world, and we can pay attention to what the darkness can teach us. We can burn with God's love and set the world on fire.

But coming back to the Holy Cross motto I began with is the central concept of "Love must act." The love of God is what brings us the gift of Jesus. The love of God for all people, all nations, is what brings us Epiphany. The Magi from the East were drawn by the love of God in the midst of darkness to find the infant Messiah. And we too can respond to that love with our own action toward God. We pray, O Lord of the day and the night, the fire and the light, lead us to your presence so that we may behold your glory face to face. Amen.