

"No Light Without Dark"

Epiphany Sunday, January 5, 2014, by Pastor Hubert Den Draak



A few days ago I watched a TV interview of a store owner who was asked how Christmas business had been this year. And she said it had been extraordinarily busy. Really, very busy, and she was surprised about it herself.

And then she said something very interesting, "We'll have to see how much of it comes back", explaining that after Christmas lots of stuff is returned. After the wonderful fun and excitement of Christmas, people get a cold shower in the form of their credit card statements,

and they go "Oh-my-gosh! I can't afford *that!*", and rush back to the store to return stuff for a cash refund.

And that is how it is for us with the nativity story today. We just heard the wonderful news of the birth of Christ. The angel choirs proclaiming the Saviour's birth still ring in our ears - and then we get hit with a cold shower in the form of the story of the Magi.

At first glance, it's a good news story. Good news for *all* people; and it is. But there's an extremely dark side to it...

Searching for the baby Jesus, the first stop the Magi make is Jerusalem, the home of the King of Judea, King Herod.

It must have been pretty disturbing for Herod to have these wise men show up and ask for directions to *another* King so they can pay homage to this other King - and not to him! Herod must have figured someone greater than he had been born. We're talking paranoid Herod here, who saw threats to his power everywhere and had only one way of dealing with them: when in doubt, kill; even if it's your own relatives.

And so, fuelled by fear and greed and jealousy, Herod orders the massacre of all the children under the age of two, just in case one of them was the One meant to take over his throne. Suddenly, the joy of Christmas is replaced by - a bloodbath, revealing how the powers of this world can respond to Christ's message of love and redemption.

But just before all this happens, the Magi bring the baby Jesus special gift, clues as to his future. Remember what they were? Right: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is obviously a worthy gift for a king, and frankincense is a very rare and valuable incense, worthy of priest and the Temple.

But they also bring myrrh... Myrrh is a costly ointment and closely associated with death. You probably remember what Mark's Gospel says: *'Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him...'* (Mark 15:22-24a).

And in John's Gospel we read about Nicodemus who brings... myrrh to anoint the crucified body of Jesus. So the Magi's gift of Myrrh reminds us that all is not well for this family. In fact, the first thing that happens to them is they become refugees, trying to escape a murderous Herod by seeking refuge in Egypt. Christ starts his life as a political refugee.

As we all know, the Magi followed a star which brought them to Jesus. Much has been made of what this special star might have been, but we will never really know. And frankly, I don't even think it's important. What's important is the underlying truth that this story wants to convey.

But the stars themselves are just mesmerizing, and have been fascinating us ever since the first human looked up at the night sky. Jacomyn and I grew up in densely populated Holland where you can hardly see any stars at night. The nights are never really dark there because of the many street lights, city lights and industrial lights; it's called "light pollution". Things weren't much better after we immigrated to Toronto, although the Muskoka area just North of Toronto gave us a first hint of what was up there.

And then, 8 years ago, we moved up here. And I vividly remember my first cloudless night in Nolalu. The moon hadn't risen yet and it was totally, absolutely, pitch-black dark. But when I looked up, I saw the sky filled with stars. For the first time in my life I saw the Milky Way, stretched out lazily from horizon to horizon. We've seen it many times since then, but that first time you never forget.

Of course what makes this amazing night sky so visible is - not the brightness of the stars, but rather the darkness of the sky. Up here there are no city lights to diminish the darkness with their glow.

It is in the midst of the darkest sky that the light of the stars shine most brightly. Isn't that what life is like? It's in the darkness that we can discover the light of Christ. And the deeper the darkness, the brighter the light.

The darkness in our lives can be very deep indeed, but it's always offset by some form of light. In real life there is always both sweet-and-sour, joy and mourning, health and sickness - light and darkness. Some people choose to focus on the darkness; but as Christians, our focus is the light. We recognise that in the darkness Christ is our light. And the darkness cannot overcome it.

Like the Magi, as we go into 2014, we must concentrate on the light which God has given to us. And when we cannot see that light and things get really dark, we

should open ourselves to God's still, small voice - again just like the Magi who heard God's voice in a dream, and let it guide them, helping them face the dangers on their path.

We do not know what the future will bring us this year, but it's probably safe to say we'll all have our share of challenges and tough times. The trick is to not get overwhelmed by them, or to close our eyes to them.

Instead, let us be like the Magi, who used the darkness so they could see the light - and discover Jesus. And just like the Magi, let us bring our gifts to Christ, humble as they may be, and honour Christ and all that he stands for in our lives and the world.

Amen.