

NIGHT VISION

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Finally we're coming to the end of the season of light. No doubt midwinter has been the season of light for as long as humans have been around. Ancient peoples celebrated the solstice: the sun had returned, the days were lengthening, and people were assured that the planting and growing season would come one more time.

And of course light is a major theme in our own tradition. In the beginning God said "Let there be light," and there was light. The Hebrew prophets cried to a nation in mourning: "Rise and shine! Your light comes!" Now here's the star, lighting the way to the Light of the World. In Bethlehem's dark streets shines the everlasting light. The light has come into the world, and the darkness has not overcome it.

For weeks our nights have been lit by lights beyond counting on every block. From Bible to boulevards, we're surrounded by metaphorical and material light. It seems that the main point is to avoid the dark. But no need to curse the dark: just light another candle. Hang another string of lights. Put out some more stars, and we can beat back the dark!

Have you ever wondered about this? Here is one of humankind's most primitive impulses: to avoid the dark, to push it back. But we have a limitless capacity for creating light, so you'd think we would have got over our fear of the dark, that it would just be the stuff of childish fantasies and sentimental old stories. But year after year, we can't seem to tell the old stories or sing the old songs without switching on yet more lights, and American enterprise is more than happy to oblige.

What is our problem with darkness, anyway? Today's readings suggest that darkness is necessary if there is to be light. Isaiah wrote to former exiles who returned to a land that no longer resembled the home they remembered. That sounds pretty dark. But he turns it around: The rest of the world will be covered by darkness, and it's in that very darkness that the light of God's glory will be seen and all people will be gathered together. The magi were about as alien to Jewish culture as anyone could be—surely they were people of the dark from the perspective of the chosen people. But there they are—willing to walk into darkness in order to come to the light of God's presence. The once-hidden mystery, as Paul puts it, is revealed to those outside the privileged circle.

I wonder, though, if actually take our cues from Herod. Herod had to know everything to maintain control. He manipulated light and dark to serve his own desires and fears. He kept others in the dark while concentrating the light on his needs—but not on his deeds. Darkness was a means to exclude people from honor, privilege, and life itself. Light provided security, power, and control.

Like Herod, we persist in considering darkness a handicap. Except in some specific social situations that I won't mention, where our goals are furthered by semi-darkness, we focus our energy on shedding more light on things. Light enables knowledge, and knowledge equals power. With enough light we can order the world according to our desires. That we're doing this is obvious when we look at a view of the dark earth from space, and see our own light shining while much of the rest of the world is dark. Our capacity for creating light around the clock give us security and confidence that we are in control, which is what it's all about for us. In the dark, anything could happen. In the light, we know where we stand. We know what is safe, who belongs, where to walk.

But what is God's intent? Is darkness *really* bad? Is light really necessary to experience and enjoy God's presence? Or might we be able to know God more fully in the dark, where we can't see distractions or hold onto other loyalties?

Let's go back to the beginning for a moment. God separated the light from the darkness. Note that Genesis doesn't say God condemned or banished the darkness, or pronounced exclusive blessing on the light. No, God simply gave each its distinct place in creation. And God said "it is good!" Light and dark, night and day—equally honored.

Alas, it wasn't long before human anxieties entered the story, and we start seeing all those metaphors that make light good and darkness bad. God keeps reminding us otherwise—appearing to Moses in a cloud, for instance. God is most intimately known when we can't see our hands before our faces, it seems. But we persisted in our fears and prejudices, all the way through naming Africa the "*dark* continent" and our own *enlightened*. We took God's good dark and light and used them to justify excluding people, denying them privilege and respect.

"Give light for our darkness," an ancient prayer says. We assume we're praying for more light that will wipe out the darkness.

But what if something else is meant?

What if God's invitation is not to turn on more lights, but to develop better night vision? "In *your* light, we see light," the psalmist says. What is dark to us is light to God.

Can you see? The magi did. The most important journey of their lives was made at night, guided by a star. Into the dark they went, trusting that they would be able to see what they needed to see. True, they assumed the object of their search would be found at a palace, undoubtedly ablaze with lights. But the star led them on, to a modest lamp-lit home on a dark village street. They obeyed their mysterious guide as it led them through the night. They trusted it to show them their goal, even when it seemed most unlikely. They went into the house, and there in the dark these outsiders saw light. There in the *darkness* they encountered the unexpected, and they were transformed.

Can you see? Isaiah did. He calls to the people: Look! You will *be* light! The people who live in darkness will be able to see the glory of God because of you. Not because you

light more candles, but because you shine with holy light—you are *in* God. The prophet later promises the people that they will no longer need the light of the sun and moon, because God alone will provide all the light they need. In that light they will know God, and in knowing they will find themselves in a new and unexpected world, one without boundaries, where all are gathered in God's presence.

Can you see? Paul did. He writes that the mystery which was hidden has been revealed to all. The time for fulfillment of the ancient, hidden wisdom is now. The place of fulfillment is this very community of faith. God's plan is revealed at last: all people are to have free access to God. No one is to be excluded. The magi were the first outsiders to be welcomed into God's presence through Jesus. Now is the time for the church to extend that welcome to the whole world.

Can you see what Martin Luther King, Jr., saw? He wrote from the Birmingham jail: "No one can ever be considered an outsider." He dreamed in the darkness of sleep of a world where all would be gathered, all honored. From one whom some used to call "dark" comes help for our night vision.

Do you see what the psalmist saw? The poor and the needy are precious in God's sight. Seeing as God sees means seeing with night vision, with God's eyes. In God's eyes we see the needs of the poor, the cries of the oppressed, the injustices suffered by those we have considered outsiders. In God's sight, all are gathered into one family, gathered into love and compassion and honor in the light of God's glory.

Do you see now? First we must walk into the dark. We must walk away from what is safe and familiar. We must walk into the dark where the walls we have built to distinguish ourselves from others disappear. Only then can we see. More candles won't help. It is in God's light alone that we see light, in God's sight alone that we understand the mystery of God's welcoming, overwhelming, powerful love. God's vision is night vision, because God *is* the light.

Several years ago, I had a surprising experience of literally walking in the dark, trusting light that didn't come from where I expected. [walk in the dark story](#)

Do you see?

Do you see? It's time to work on our night vision. Let us open our eyes to see as God sees, open our hearts to love as God loves, open our arms to include all people, for God sees and loves them all.

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