

Most of us struggle with "darkness" because it hides what we want to see, and makes us about what we can't see. That is one reason winter can be so tough – there is more darkness than we like. We have flashlights to look in dark corners. Our cars have headlights so we don't miss a curve in the road at night. And we have nightlights so that we don't stumble or walk into a doorway at night. Darkness is an absence of light.

Herod was in the dark, as he sought information that would allow him to deal with that thought of a rival to his throne. The darkness in which he lived prevented him from knowing the true nature or prophecies of the Messiah and so he tried to use the light gathering abilities of wise men to deal with the shadows and fears that oppressed every moment of his reign. Herod was trapped in the black hole of evil.

We face similar moments of darkness day after day, and each can blanket us with the same depression and fear as the evil in the heart of Herod. For some it is the loss of a loved one or frustration at work. For others it might be anger, or selfishness or greed. Depression and physical illness can bring as much darkness as the darkest night and can cloud our vision just as the surely as the darkest, coldest night of winter.

We have just celebrated the greatest gift of Light called Christmas. We sang "Joy to the World" and rejoiced with angel choirs. But how are YOU doing now that trees are coming down and lights are being put away? And what about those who celebrated a holiday, but failed to understand why Christmas is a "holy" day? Many have simply not yet "seen THE light" and they step back into daily darkness without the Light of Christ!

January 6 was Epiphany, the last of the twelve days of Christmas. Epiphany means "to show, make known, or reveal." On this day, wise men from a gentile land were led by a star to find the Messiah. In the darkest night of winter, we celebrate that a Light has come to chase away the world's shadows forever, and that the Messiah is Savior of all!

And one of the first messages of that moment is not our vision of three men in bright robes riding on camels, but the realization that Christmas isn't complete until Christ touches all lives and hearts. This story in Matthew's Gospel is important because Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience and he wanted those who loved Jesus to know that Jesus was more than a Jewish Messiah ... he was a savior for an entire world. That is the power of the irony that Herod, the Jewish king was in the dark, but gentiles from a pagan world were able to see the light. And Herod was dependent on their vision because his was corrupted so completely by selfishness, greed and evil.

It is not enough to "know the story." We are called to let the Light shine brightly in all that we do. Darkness is still darkness and without the Light, we will be surrounded by shadows no matter how strong or well-intentioned we might be. But when the Light shines brightly, the shadows are kept at a distance and the warmth from the Light chases the frost of dark nights away.

Epiphany leads from the manger to Transfiguration and Lent -- and here is where Christ has truly surprised the world even more than at Christmas. When we face the passion

of Jesus and think that it is going to get really dark again – it only gets brighter on Easter day!!!

Shepherds and angels are gone, yet a star led wise men to that same new life. Herod's plan was to extinguish that Light, but from the beginning, God showed that his plan is to overcome any darkness this world can muster.

I have several friends, who have all lost children to death. For a parent there can be nothing darker. And yet each of them has found ways to share their burden with others who understand. One of the painful realities is that there is no wisdom or easy answer that will make the pain of that loss disappear. And yet, each has found out that out of that darkness has come the ability to share with others who understand, which becomes both a support for someone else and healing for each of us who are touched by the strength of others. It is no different than Jesus' time in the tomb. He was born to die, and it was only in the darkness of the tomb that we would both understand that he has known our grief, and that in his escape he would convince us of our shared victory.

This season reminds us of a solar eclipse. Ancient peoples panicked when they thought the light had gone out and celebrated when it finally returned. We are more sophisticated with our science, but too often take the Light for granted, thinking we can always find a light when we need one. But sometimes the darkness sneaks up on us and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Today's good news is that God's Light is stronger!

Listen to this good news from the letter to the Ephesians: *“For at one time you were **darkness**, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”* [Ephesians 5:8]

Today we are reminded that wise men once looked into the darkness and found the light. On the way, they encountered the darkness of Herod's deceit, but kept their focus on the light that had changed the darkness forever.

Epiphany reminds us that Christmas is about chasing the darkness away! From the darkness the Light beckons. Standing in Light the darkness is chased away! As we draw closer to the Light we feel its warmth. As we walk with the Light, no matter where we go, Christ shines in our hearts.

And just as wise men traveled home by a "different way" we too are called to leave Christmas as changed people. We too are to walk back to our lives, but by a different path – for we have seen the Light and carry it too.

I remember fishing once on Lake Erie where suddenly we were surrounded by fog and darkness and clouds. We were only about five miles out and knew we were headed in right direction, but traveling in such darkness was a journey I never wanted to repeat ... and then we saw the light ... we had found the channel and were safely home.

This season is one in which we remember how a light shines brightly in the darkness, and like a bonfire, is able to chase the darkness away.

Dark days and moments will continue to invade our lives. But if we stand with the Light of Christ, those shadows are held at bay. When we live by faith our path is always brightened by His saving love. And when darkness touches our imperfect lives and

world, as it always does, how much more do we appreciate the power of the Light! In such times of recovery and healing, it is even more important to remember that we have a gift to share.

*It isn't the lights we place that change world -- but LIGHT of world that changes us, drawn to the Light, we now carry that light into every dark place we can find!*