

Baptism of Our Lord (RCL/B)
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11
January 9-10, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

That day will bring darkness, not light. (Amos 5:18)

Wednesday wasn't supposed to be that kind of day. It was Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, "Little Christmas." In our on-line morning, noon and evening prayer we heard again the story of the star that announced the Savior's birth and shone so brightly in the heavens that it led magi, wise men, (perhaps astronomers), to the Child Jesus.

But any of us checking the news feed on our phones or computers, listening to the radio or watching TV knew about the growing group of protesters that became an angry mob, overwhelming Capitol police, breaching barriers, assaulting and entering the Capitol building, the Rotunda, the House and Senate chambers, and various offices. We learned the Vice President and our legislators had to be rushed to safety and were sheltering in an undisclosed location. We heard that a distress call had gone out from police within the Capitol, asking for reinforcements. And I began to feel like I did on 9/11, after the towers collapsed, after the plane was downed in Pennsylvania, after the Pentagon was hit – frightened and wondering where it would all lead? Would the next image be of our Capitol end up in flames? Was our government secure? What was happening to our world??

On 9/11 I worried that the Lincoln Memorial may have also been targeted, and that another plane would plow into it and take out Mr. Lincoln, who is near and dear to my heart. Speaking of whom, what was Mr. Lincoln thinking on Wednesday as he viewed the violence at the other end of the Mall from his perch by the reflecting pool?

Pastor Mark & I don't tune into C-Span on a regular basis (more like "almost never"), but once Congress reconvened Wednesday evening, we did, and came across House Speaker Nancy Pelosi saying, "Today is the Feast of the Epiphany," then explaining how Epiphany means the manifestation, the showing forth of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary. She then proceeded to read the Prayer of St. Francis on behalf of our nation: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon, where there is doubt, faith, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, **light....**"

It had been a day of darkness, not light, so I was hungry for the reminder that there **is** a Light which **has** come into the world, a Light which the darkness **has not** overcome and **will never** extinguish. That Light is our Lord Jesus Christ, who said straight out:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. (John 8: 12)

It is also He who said,

*¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. [Kinda like the Capitol building itself.] ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let **your** light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)*

That's our baptismal commission, the verse from the Sermon on the Mount that the assisting minister quotes as the baptismal taper lit from the Paschal candle is presented to the newly baptized. It's a Kingdom job description for the rest of our life: "...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

This concept of light-bearing isn't new with Jesus. It's deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition in which He was raised and which He so loved. In Advent we heard the passage

from Isaiah in which the Lord tells the people of Israel, *“I have given you as... a **light** to the nations.”* (Isaiah 42:6)

That message was reinforced the other night when Pastor Mark & I logged onto a Zoom event co-sponsored by CHHANGE, the holocaust and genocide education center at Brookdale Community College. The speaker was 100-year-old Marthe Cohen, a French Jew who worked first with the Resistance and then as a spy with the Free French during World War II. I'll tell you more of her amazing story in my February Pastor's Pen ☺. What I'd like to share now is something said by the rabbi who introduced Marthe. He spoke about God calling out to Moses from the burning bush, commissioning him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to release the children of Israel from slavery. Moses isn't enthusiastic about the idea and says, “But the others will ask me **who** told me to do this, **who** sent me. What shall I say??” And God cryptically answers, “Tell them, ‘I will be who I will be.’” The rabbi reflected that there was no answer as to why the children of Israel suffered so under Pharaoh, or under any other oppressor. (He didn't mention Hitler, but he sure could've.) The rabbi said that **God's message to the people through Moses was that they were not alone in their suffering and they would never, ever be.** God would always be with them. (And then I thought to myself, “Ah, Emmanuel,” Hebrew for God-with-us.) The rabbi said, “The question isn't **why** but **what**. **What** will we do? **We'll bring light into the world.**” I loved hearing his reflection at the beginning of Epiphany, the season of light....

The way we Christians bring light into the world is by reflecting the light of Christ we receive in Holy Baptism. We reflect, we shine with, we magnify the light of Christ when we love our neighbor. Jesus Himself said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and the 2nd greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as

ourselves. Another ray of light on Wednesday, that day of darkness, was the speech of Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse after Congress reconvened in the evening. Here's part:

America has always been about what we choose to do together, the way we reaffirm our constitutional system where we've got some governmental tasks... but the heart of America is not government.

The center of America is not Washington, D.C. The center of America is the neighborhoods where 330 million Americans are raising their kids and trying to put food on the table and trying to love their neighbor. That's the center of America. We [members of Congress] are not supposed to be the most important people in America, we're supposed to be servant leaders....

Sometimes the big things we do are governmental, like kicking Hitler's [...] or like going to the moon... but the heart of America is about places where moms and dads are raising kids, and we're supposed to serve them by maintaining order and by rejecting violence.

You can't do big things like that if you hate your neighbors. You can't do big things together as Americans if you think other Americans are the enemy.

Look, there's a lot of uncertainty about the future, I get it. There's a lot that does need to be rebuilt. But if you're angry, I want to beg you – don't let the screamers who monetize hate have the final word. Don't let nihilists become your drug dealers. There are some who want to burn it all down. We met some of them today. But they aren't going to win. Don't let them be your prophets. Instead, organize, persuade, but most importantly, love your neighbor. Visit the widower down the street who's lonely and didn't want to tell anybody that his wife died and he doesn't have a lot of friends. Shovel someone's driveway. You can't hate somebody who just shoveled your driveway....

Go forth and shine with Christ-light this season, this year, this lifetime. Remember your baptismal commission to do just that, "*so that [everyone] may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" Hold close to your heart the wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday is this coming Friday: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."¹ Amen

¹Astead W. Herndon and Rick Rojas, "Democrats Take Senate With Victories in Georgia," *The New York Times* (January 7, 2021, A1, A19), A19.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

