

This past summer, I fulfilled a long time dream. A friend and I canoed into the interior of Algonquin Park and camped in the interior. It was an amazing trip filled with spectacular sights, friendship, and the peace of being out in the wilderness. Evening came, and we settled into our tent, turned off the light, and quickly fell asleep. But then I woke up and I was wide awake with the restlessness of trying to sleep away from home and a thin air mattress. I listened to the creaky sound of beetles chewing on dead wood, of loon calls echoing. And I tried not to think of what was outside on my side of the tent. My friend was on the side with the campground, the lake, but on my side were the trees, the vast, animal filled wilderness. Now, I'm a pretty rational person and I've lived a good deal of my life near the wilderness. I know that black bear attacks are extremely rare, that wolves stay away from people, and that moose don't trip over tents crushing people under their huge bodies. But in the dark things are different. In the darkness the primordial fears lurk and linger, written into our bodies through evolution and our ancestry. It sits on the edges of our mind taunting us "yeah but what if. The darkness is dangerous you know." Thankfully I was able to keep these thoughts at bay only amusing at them, and when morning's light came the peace and beauty of our surroundings returned.

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Here they come chasing a star. They are late comers to the story, taking their place in the nativity scene long after the holy family arrives, when many of us are ready to pack in the Christmas decorations and turn off the lights. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is born at home, in the comfortable, safe, and familiar place. There is no prenatal travel to fulfill a census, no stable maternity ward, no shepherds with angel song. Matthew tells of an

ordinary home birth followed by extraordinary visitors. After the birth, the magi arrive. They are ones who search the stars, the signs, their surroundings for truths beyond common knowledge. They have chased a new star, an ancient symbol of a significant birth. When they find the child they respond with worship and generosity.

It is a beautiful and inspiring story: following holy signs into new places, seeing God in the midst of the ordinary, responding to the sacred by worshiping and offering of our gifts. It invites us to think about the stars in our lives, the places that leave us inspired and lead us into worshipful and generous living.

We need these stories of light, stories of inspiration. Our faith responds to this by giving us the wonderful season of Epiphany and filling the lengthy nights of winter with luminosity. Epiphany means “Manifestation” or “showing forth.” It is a season of dazzling light and revelation, where we hear the stories of Jesus’ ministry and proclaim that in him we encounter divine light<sup>1</sup>. We celebrate how Jesus reveals the divine light that shines in all of us, that shines in all creation. We celebrate the light that leads us to discipleship and love in action. We need stories of light, stories of inspiration. We need to be reminded that God’s love, peace, and justice fill our lives and this world.

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But just as we get comfortable with a story of light, of new life, holy birth, magnificent star light, and magi worshiping and giving, we hear a story of darkness. The story of the magi is also the story of King Herod. Herod, who is not really a king, he’s a puppet ruler, set in place by the Roman

Empire. Historically he is known for lifting up the interests of the occupying and oppressive empire, and his brutal violence towards his own people and his own family.

And when we are ready for stories of light, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us of the darkness. Darkness is deeply symbolic. For the majority of human existence darkness was a substantial force. Until about the year 1800 in Europe most people could not afford candles. Up until recently, when night fell it was very dark. Night and darkness are associated throughout the world with danger, fear, evil, grief, limited sight and understanding. It can be easy in our lit up world to forget the symbolic depth of darkness.

In Matthew the star points out that Jesus is the light. Herod, on the other hand, is the darkness. He is danger and fear, he is the source of grief and suffering, he is limited sight and understanding, irrationality, and terror. Upon hearing about Jesus' birth from the Magi Herod is filled with fear and explodes with rage. He orders all children under two in Bethlehem to be killed. He becomes the new Pharaoh standing against God and the light of love, peace, and justice. The holy family flee, becoming refugees as they leave their home, their country, their family, friends, and people. When we are celebrating the stories of light, the Gospel of Matthew reminds us of the darkness.

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It is easy to want to edit out Herod, cut away the darkness. Maybe that's why none of our nativity scenes have Herod lingering from the sidelines. The Gospel of Matthew tells a troubling story, but it is a very true story. It's

not true in the sense of was there really a moving star, or the mass murdering of children. This story is holy myth, and holy myth speaks to deeper and ever present truths. The truth is that all around us there are stories of light and darkness, of birth and murder, of home and fleeing, of Magi and Herod. The Gospel of Matthew invites us to hold the full reality of the world, to celebrate the light, the light in Christ, the holy light within and all around us. And it reminds us that we cannot shy away from, block out, or ignore the darkness.

The difficult truth is that Herod lurks within us and all around us. Herod is the violent, fearful, destructive forces that divides us from one another, that lead us to mistrust, that is so afraid of losing power or privilege or safety that killing, ignoring, or rejecting others seems like the right thing to do. The difficult truth is the holy family is still on the run fleeing Herod as refugees, migrants, runaways, and wanderers seeking safety, security, and less dangerous places. The murdering of the innocents continues, as killings, maiming, and abuses leave graves, traumas, and aching souls. As we worship the light, the Gospel of Mark reminds us that faith also leads us to confronting the darkness.

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Holding the reality of star and blood, magi and Herod, light and darkness, Matthew makes a bold proclamation. Matthew proclaims in parable what John says in poetry: The light came and dwelt among us and darkness cannot overcome the light. The Gospel of Matthew boldly proclaims that God's light shines brightly in the world bringing love, peace, and justice to all. And just as the tyrant pharaoh's injustice could not last and freedom came to the people, just as Herod could not kill the child and the child

became the man who inspired people, just as the next Herod could not silence the Christ on the cross, the light of God continues to shine bringing wholeness to the world.

New Years brings with it a time of reflecting for many people. Many are looking back at 2016 with disappointment, looking ahead at 2017 with fear, feeling a weightiness and sense of hopelessness because we know all too well that there will be more Herods, more blood, fleeing, fear, division and destruction. But as people of faith we are called to stand with the Gospel of Matthew and make a bold proclamation. In our words and our actions we hold good news: there is light shining even in the darkest corners of our life and our world, and light always overcomes darkness. We are called to remember and remind others that life is a blessing, filled with holiness and wonder, that love, peace, and justice can be a reality for all, and that hope and love-in-action are the path we are called to journey upon.

So, let us dare to celebrate the light and not fear the darkness. May we encounter the Christ light shining within us and all around us. For there is no Herod too strong and no darkness too vicious that holy light cannot shine. Let us live this good news for we are part of a holy story. Amen. Let it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> [Living the Christ life](#)