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Date: December 27, 2015
Sermon Title: Light in the Darkness
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 2:7-15

Matthew 2:7-15

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The darkest time of year is right after Christmas. It's dark emotionally, physically, even Biblically. It's dark outside earlier and longer. At least it seems that way. Yes, I know the science, the winter solstice is over, and so, incrementally, the darkest day is over . . . *but*, with January and February looming, it feels dark. And, yes, we've loved our Arizona weather the last few weeks or so, flowers blooming in the backyard on Christmas, but it feels like the calm before the storm or before the blizzard.

And the Christmas story itself turns dark after Christmas. I know that our Christmas crèches always have the Holy Family, the shepherds, and the Wise Men all there together, but the fact is the Wise Men showed up later. We know this for two reasons. The Bible tells us that when Jesus was 8 days old, his parents brought him to the Temple in Jerusalem for the special celebrations connected with birth. *and*, the Bible tells us that when the Wise Men visited Jesus, he was in a house, not a stable. *and*, I hate to tell you this part, the Wise Men warned Mary and Joseph that King Herod was hunting for Jesus, killing every baby in sight in his mad attempt to eliminate competition, so I don't think that if the Wise Men went to the stable on Christmas and told everybody about Herod's murderous intentions, that Mary and Joseph would have chosen to hang around for a couple of weeks, especially in Jerusalem.

It makes more sense that Jesus was born in a stable, the Shepherds show up, the Holy Family moves into a house nearby, they do the religious rituals at the Temple, the Wise Men visit, give their gifts, and then, just as the Bible says, God warned the Wise Men in a dream that King Herod was out to destroy any child that might grow up to become "the King of the Jews." So the Wise men warned Joseph, Joseph packs up his little family, and they escape to Egypt. That's what I meant when I said even the Christmas story turns dark after Christmas.

This year is the first time in my lifetime that the refugee story of Jesus has linked up so clearly with a refugee crisis in the world. Yes, we had the "boat people" escaping Vietnam and Cuba. And there were vicious civil wars in the world where folks fled into neighboring countries, but those events, for the most part, didn't touch us. But now, we live in an age of instant communication, citizen journalism, everybody with a cell phone can take a picture, tell a story. So when the little refugee boy washed up on the shore of Turkey a few months ago, we saw it, we felt it, we knew his story, we knew his name: Aylan Kurdi.

And when the hundreds of thousands of refugees began streaming out of Syria, Eritrea, Libya, and landed in Greece, Italy, flowing across the borders into Hungary, France, Germany, England, again we saw it. It was real to us, visceral. Whatever the geopolitics of it, we could feel it.

I had the tiniest sensation of that on Christmas Day. Not even one-millionth of it, but it made me think. We went into New York City on Christmas Day. A church friend had surgery on Christmas Eve, so we visited him and his family at Columbia Presbyterian, and then we had a lovely Italian dinner on 44th Street. At that point it was, you know, "Times Square-ish," crowded, a little crazy, but it always is. After dinner, we walked to Rockefeller Center—we wanted to see the tree, the store windows on Fifth Avenue, the light

show at Saks, go into St. Patrick's. There was about a four-block area where it got scary. The crowd was so dense, it was as if the whole world had descended on that little piece of property. Our little swirling mass of humanity was beyond control. There were times the cops would yell, "STOP!" But there was no way to stop. Other times the cops would urge us to move, but that wasn't up to us. My movement was dependent on the crowds in front of me, on either side of me, behind me. But we were having fun. We had just had a great dinner, we were on a great adventure, and we could come home to a great house.

That's not the case for the world's refugees as they stream out of one violent area looking for safety in some other place. That wasn't the case for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, filled with fear, the mad King Herod terrorizing Bethlehem, with nothing but the clothes on their back, with a newborn baby and a barely recovered nursing mom. They escaped to Egypt. Evil behind them. Uncertainty ahead of them. Questions all around them. Where would they live? Would people help them? What would they eat? Where would they sleep?

When my father was a pastor in Brooklyn, he had an Egyptian family in his church, and they absolutely insisted that he go with them to Egypt, which he did. He would tell you, it was the most amazing trip of his life. The hospitality he was shown, the kindness, the welcome, the care. And every time he expressed this, every time he offered his thanks, people said, "Don't be surprised, that's why Jesus and his family came to Egypt." And they would show him pilgrimage places, "See, here is the tree where Mary sat to feed the baby Jesus and to rest . . . see, here is where the Holy Family lived in Egypt . . . see, here is where Joseph worked."

Those were tough times for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but they got through it, and my guess is that two things got them through it. First, their faith, and I mean that both personally and spiritually. Spiritually they had faith in God, that God had a plan and a path and a purpose. I was thinking of a couple of old hymns. One says, "God is working his purpose out," and the other says, "My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow." Mary and Joseph believed that. And I think they had faith in themselves. They had just given birth to life, and they weren't going to give up on that life.

Just the other day I watched an old John Wayne cowboy movie, "3 Godfathers." These three outlaws, including John Wayne, stumble across a covered wagon stranded in the desert, as a woman gives birth to a baby boy. The mom knows she's not going to live, so she binds the three outlaws to her baby, names the boy after each of them, makes them promise to care for him, makes them the "Godfathers." No matter what, this mom was

saying, no matter what, this life was going to live, whatever it takes. Mary and Joseph had that faith. That's number one.

Number two, let's credit some of those Egyptians. I'm sure God worked through the Egyptians. I'm sure God pointed the Holy Family toward the right Egyptians, but at each point, some Egyptian stood up and chose to do the right thing. Some Egyptian did not mutter, "Darn foreigners." Some Egyptian rented them a room or a house. Some Egyptian did not say, "Look at that Jewish carpenter taking a job away from an Egyptian." Some Egyptian hired Joseph. Some Egyptian gave them food, lent them some baby clothes till Mary and Joseph got on their feet. Some Egyptian welcomed Mary at the village well in the morning, took her to the marketplace for the first time. Some Egyptian translated for them. You add it up, it's a whole lot of Egyptians doing the right thing at the right time in the right spirit. Give them credit. Give God credit. Give Mary and Joseph credit. Give the Egyptians credit. Like most things, especially good things, it takes a team to get through dark times.

The opposite of dark times, the antidote, the answer is *light*. St. John's version of the Christmas story doesn't have the detail of Matthew and Luke. There's no star, no Wise Men or shepherds, no angels. John is more poetic, philosophical. "In the beginning was the *Word* . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . In him was *life*, and that life was the *light*. That light shines in the *darkness*, but the darkness cannot overcome it." Doesn't that pretty much summarize the world we live in? There's darkness, and there's light. Pick one. Be one. Follow one.

There's darkness. And there's light. Jesus makes the choice fairly clear. "I am the light of the world," he says. (John 8:12) Is that too much for you? Too boastful, too arrogant? I don't think so because he also says, "You are the light of the world!" (Matthew 5:14) "Let your light shine," he almost shouts, "let it shine so that everybody can see it and praise God." When it comes to darkness and light, there's no middle ground, no gray area, no bystanders. You either bring light or you contribute to the darkness.

I've been in dark places. I've stood there with no flashlight, no matches. Wittingly or unwittingly, I contributed to the darkness. Whether literally or metaphorically, you've been there too. I hardly need to itemize the forces of darkness in our world: Terrorism. Sickness. Hatred. Poverty. Problems at work, at home, in a family.

On Christmas Day we had a lovely little service. Believe it or not, we just started this tradition last year. We have the five Christmas Eve services to accommodate every schedule. There were 1,300 people here! But Christmas Day—well, it *is* Christmas—so we added a Christmas Day service. Very low-

key, Alida plays the piano. I give the shortest sermon of my life, and this year I asked a question. I said, "Jesus was born on Christmas. He's supposed to be the 'Prince of Peace.' The angels promised 'Peace on Earth,' 2,000 years have gone by. We don't seem that much closer to peace. How can we help Jesus be the Prince of Peace? The Wise Men brought gifts to Jesus. What gift could we give to Jesus that would help him be 'Prince of Peace'?"

One little boy in the very back row raised his hand. So Alida ran over to him, gave him the microphone, and Aiden said, "I would smile at everybody!" And what do we say about some people? We say, "They have a smile that lights up the room!"

I love Alida. Some other day I could give you a list of the "whys," but today I'll just mention she can light up a room. I watch her all the time, with complete strangers or with people who are grumpy, mean, irritable, negative, sometimes people I've made grumpy; and she turns it all around. A word, a smile, a comment, a question, some interest shown, some grace extended, a little light in a dark moment.

Now, is this the answer to world peace? The solution to ISIS? The end to global poverty? I'm not putting that on you. The world's greatest minds, the world's greatest generals, the world's greatest politicians, the world's greatest religious leaders—they haven't solved it, so I'm not putting it in your lap, or mine. But we can make a difference where we are and whom we're with.

I'm going to close with my favorite poem by me! I'm not saying it's my best poem or that you have to like it, only that I like it. The poem is based on the Scriptures I mentioned. "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness cannot overcome it." It was inspired by a childhood memory.

In our neighborhood in Queens, folks started a nighttime safety project. Every night, beginning around 7 o'clock, every house on the block turned *off* the front porch light . . . except one. And at that one house you were guaranteed the door was unlocked, someone was inside waiting, ready to welcome you, take care of you, keep you safe. So if you were coming home from work late at night or from a school dance or just out for a walk, and you felt nervous, you heard footsteps, you felt threatened in some way, you looked down the block, you saw the light. Indeed the darkness sees the light, "and the darkness cannot overcome it." I took that memory and other literary references and personal experiences to build this poem:

"The Light Shines in the Darkness..."
(John 1:1-5)

A candle
set upon a hill
for all the city to see

the railway man's lantern
breaking through the night mist
signaling all is well
for the journey*

a shooting star
or the first rays of dawn
breaking a dark night's spell

the sun
edging through storm clouds
and a rainbow's "yes" to life

a porch light
its welcoming glow
inviting the stranger
to feel at home

a lighthouse beam
dispelling danger
pointing toward safe harbor

a kind hello
a friendly wave
a hearty gesture
all unexpected treasure

a glimpse of heaven
a touch of earth
a hint of smile
a surprising guest for the extra mile

" ... and the Darkness cannot overcome it."

*Rivas, Manuel. *The Carpenter's Pencil*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2001.
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