

Lamplighter

January 2, 2022

Lamplighter

One of the ironies of becoming a parent as late in life as I have is that, just as my daughter is sleeping through the night, I'm not any longer. It's a phenomenon that started this summer, with me waking for an hour or two in the middle of the night. Knowing myself well enough, I know that the best way to get back to sleep is by reading, and so, I've started to weave my way back through the classics, looking to immerse myself in beauty, while at the same time not needing anything that will bring any surprises.

And so it was that I found myself rereading Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" last month. You all know the basic premise: Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and yet to come, who ultimately motivate a redemptive transformation in his life.

One minor character that struck me as I read the novella this year is that of the lamplighter. We rarely think of folks like lamplighters today, so full of light is our world, so reliable and ubiquitous is electric power. But in Dickens' time, the lamplighter moved from house to house, from neighborhood to neighborhood, lighting the streetlights, literally enlightening the way for others, pushing away the darkness, so that others might see.

This antiquated vocation comes to mind for me as the church transitions today from our celebration of the Christmas Season and into the Season of Epiphany. Today, we hear of the Magi following a light to find the Christ child, and our Hebrew Scripture from Isaiah 60 tells us to Arise and shine, for our light has come! The passage speaks of darkness covering the peoples of the earth, and yet the glory of God will appear over us, a light so compelling that we will not only see, we will be radiant, and will draw others to us with that light.

Lights draw people to them. It's why the imagery of the "bat symbol" works in Batman. The spotlight draws the caped crusader out on his nightly rounds. Drawn "like a moth to a flame" is a common phrase that speaks to us of how compelling light is. And from campfires to fireplaces to candlelight, there is something about light that is universally attractive. Even the lamplighter, such as in "A Christmas Carol," drew people out of their homes, made it safer to walk the city streets at night.

And so, as we step into this church season that celebrates the Light among us, my question for you this week is, "how are you a lamplighter?" How do you bear Christ's light in your life? How does the grace of God so radiate from you, that others are not only drawn to you, they are enlightened by your presence?

Tutu

Last Sunday during the Children's Sermon, I shared that one of God's best friends, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, died at 90 years old, and talked about how the way you get to be best friends is by really knowing, really understanding, really "getting" someone. Archbishop Tutu was one of God's best friends, because he really understood God and God's ways and God's values.

Tutu, who is best known for using his Christian faith to lead the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, understood both the inherent dignity of all human beings, regardless of law or status, as well as God's ways of transformation through relationship. The light radiated out of Tutu as he stood up to the brutality of the government – which, I will remind, you was also supported by the church – and it also radiated out of him as he courageously stood up to the horrifying violence of his own people, who employed execution by fire against anyone they thought was a traitor. There's a story of him, still dressed in his bishop's regalia, interjecting himself between an angry mob and a man they were beating and intending to put to death after accusing him of being a police informant.

In another story, Archbishop Tutu was at the airport in Johannesburg, preparing to board. Nearly all of the roughly 400 passengers passed through security without incident...except Tutu. This was 1986, two years after he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. No one in South Africa could have not known who he was and what he stood for.

“Yet of all the passengers in the line he was the only traveler submitted to the indignity of a body search. It seemed intended as much as anything to remind him of his chromatic status (that is, his status as a person of color) in the apartheid nation. Perhaps, he mused, his metal pectoral cross had triggered an alarm. ‘Did they think it was a weapon?’ he asked.”

(Alan Cowell, New York Times)

And, of course, he knew that it was. Not in the sense of a knife or gun, but in the sense that, when wielded with integrity and compassion, the Christian faith has the power to be one of the most powerful tools to combat hate and bigotry that humanity has ever seen. Tutu's cross was a symbol of the Light, a symbol of Christ's peace, joy, justice, and love that radiated out of him and that others found so compelling that they were drawn to him.

The Rest of Us

Now, the question is, how can WE be lamplighters? How can we allow Christ's mercy and healing and wholeness to emanate from our very beings, so that people will experience our God through us? Don't worry, I'm not going to suggest you knock on people's doors, or even suggest a heartfelt faith talk with someone you're close to.

No, what I'm suggesting is much harder. To be a lamplighter, we need to LIVE Communion. To be a lamplighter, Christ's ways of inclusion and humility, of questioning the way we've always done things, of speaking truth to power, but also speaking truth to ourselves, need to be what nourishes us, what we feed on, until those are the things that radiate out of us.

I think of lamplighters among us, like Union members who run for public office and refuse to get into the mudslinging of their opponents. I think of lamplighters among us, like the folks who will be leading our Sunday Morning Adult Education Zooms the next few weeks – the folks from You Belong Church, who are working to serve people with disabilities and their loved ones and caregivers, the folks who are coordinating efforts to house and welcome the Afghanis who are resettling here in Green Bay, the folks who are creating a new homeless shelter here in Green

Bay because right now there are no facilities that can house unaccompanied teens, a population that is particularly vulnerable, and one this church has a particular responsibility for, as unaccompanied teens are often on the street because they've been kicked out of their homes for being LGBTQ+. I think of our middle school youth group who, when invited to do a service project, decided to create gift baskets for nursing home residents who wouldn't be getting visits from family this Christmas.

Conclusion

We often think of Epiphany as a sudden revelation or insight, like the dream the Magi had, which inspired them to go home a different way. But on this New Year's weekend, rather than engaging in resolutions that will inevitably be broken, I'd like to invite you, instead, into being a lamplighter. What if we all commit to bearing Christ in this weary world? What if we all commit to letting the Communion we celebrate course through our veins? Archbishop Tutu is quoted as having said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." What if this year, we commit to being agents of God's hope?

Go ahead and commit to your exercise and eating plans. Go ahead and commit to reading more and drinking less. All of those are good and healthy things, and if you make any movement at all on them, you'll be healthier for it. But from a faith perspective, my prayer for us all this year is that we'll be lamplighters. That we'll find ways to let God's ways radiate out from us, and in turn, that the glory of God will dispel the darkness.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
January 2, 2022