

Epiphany III Year A

“and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.”

As a child I was afraid of the dark. I can remember asking my parents to leave my bedroom door ajar to let the light of the hallway into the unruly darkness of the night. When I was in the fourth grade our class went to Marianna Caverns just south of Dothan and at the mid point during the tour of the caves the guide turned off the lights so that we could experience “total and complete” darkness...In the five seconds of dark which felt like an eternity I could feel the fear and panic welling up inside of me, making its way towards my throat... What if the lights wouldn't come back on? I wondered...but they did and to my great relief we made our way back into the light of day...I still remember the moist and mineral smell of that stolid dark.... Its mundane presence...its primordial depth...its palpable, penetrating reality.... Darkness, a living metaphor, a living symbol of a dark far more terrible than the mere absence of light.

It is this terrible darkness with which, not only the writer of Matthew, but the Jewish scribes of the third and fourth centuries we call Isaiah before him...It is this terrible darkness with which they are concerned. These writers are speaking of salvation up and against the powers of darkness... not a personal self-interested matter, but salvation of a people...the bringing of a just, peaceful world in which well being and dignity are the rubrics of life...for a people. In Matthew's day, his known world is dark and darkening still...Palestine is under brutal Roman occupation...taxes are unbearable... subsistence is highly compromised... corruption and violence abound... Roman violence upon the Jews... and Jewish factions violent against each other...the Temple has been razed... The Jewish traditions and way of life threatened, eroded... the world is falling apart, fallen prey to the insatiable dark. Fear, “the region and shadow” within which the people live... Isaiah's world is beset by the dark as well. Israel is overrun by conquest after conquest.... Her people slaughtered unmercifully... or deported to foreign lands...scattered, uprooted among alien peoples...refugees in the dark... sojourners in dispossession, in the deathly regions and shadows.

Indeed the presence of this pervading darkness is a central theme throughout the whole of scripture. We encounter the selfsame darkness in the very beginning in Genesis...God moves over the face of the cavernous deep...the very womb of creation bringing light, gracious, transforming and life-giving light..... Our world is no different.... We are hostage to the terrible, oppressive dark.... Dark that seems an eternity.... There are

millions still in our world who don't have adequate drinking water.... Violence remains institutionalized as the means of resolving conflict, even among so-called civilized societies.... Environmental catastrophe driven by greed looms malignant and unchecked... Our world leaders lack conviction, in league perhaps unwittingly with the dark.... The disparity of wealth and therefore power is growing out of control by every measure we have... and in our own nation, unbridled gun violence abounds.... There is the exponential shrinking middle class and the growing poor; the rise of the unimpeachable power of the military industrial complex, and of corporations set on profits at the expense of the least of us.... We have a crisis in education and healthcare access.... and in our own state and city, racism abounds... Our very constitution deems it so.... Our own governor and many of our legislature who purport to be Christian would deny healthcare to almost two hundred thousand of the poor among us... Really!? The health of our brothers and sisters is a gospel imperative y'all.... It is baffling, this dark. We live in a city that is still segregated... black and white.... Just walk a mile away from here, past the line of demarcation... at three mile creek, and look upon the abject squalor in which people live... boarded up, crumbling buildings, shattered glass and shattered lives... plastic bottles and fast food packaging caught like dead birds in the sedge bordering the dark and ignoble waters... the proverbial river Styx bearing commerce of the condemned.

I am not talking about philosophical, abstract darkness here, but darkness real, darkness in the flesh... It is easy to speak of such darkness in metaphor... we can leave the metaphors alone if we so choose.... In an affluent culture we can lock the dark outside the castle walls... but the dark will not stay outside... It will not be appeased... It will encroach just as it forever has... But dear brothers and sisters there is still yet the prophecy, the prophecy in the DNA of our humanity... in the DNA of the world's beginnings... the good news as it were... the life-giving hopeful vision heralded from the beginning... another metaphor:... light... and like the dark, light has its reality in earth as well, beyond abstraction... light that will break upon the darkness of our world.... Light, profound, palpable, penetrating... real.... There are names in earth of such light... light real and warm and true: names like mercy and compassion... names like kindness and forgiveness... names like non-violence, peace, justice and fairness... light, the sharing of the world's abundance... light, the practice of welcome and hospitality... this light is the light of love... not an otherworldly sepia shaft from heaven framed in a renaissance painting... but bright energy that flows through the arteries and veins of the human community bringing

dignity and well being to our world... setting right things that have been subverted by the dark.

Brothers and sisters we are reborn into a second life as followers of Christ... In our first life we live for ourselves out of necessity... but we are born again into a second life in which we live for the good of our neighbor... As children we live for ourselves of necessity, but we mature into the prophetic vision of living for the ones given to us, the ones besieged by the insidious dark... Do not doubt that it is this second life for which we are born... There is no other reason that we are here on this earth, for the very short time we are here on this earth.... No reason but to tend to each other... artfully drawing all of God's people into the light of well being and dignity... a light every bit as real as the dark... and yet more powerful... And further good news:... It is by bearing this light to the world that the darkness that haunts our own souls is dispelled, rendered powerless... overcome.... To bear God's life to the world is to be truly human... To bear God's life to the world is to live in joy and confidence and with courage... and above all, to bear God's light, is to live without fear.... The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light... Let us be that light and live. Let us be that light in the regions and shadows of the dark... and live.