Text: John 1: 1-5
Title: Christmas reflections
Date: December 24, 2009

"Twas the night before Christmas"…. Most of us, when we hear those words immediately think in terms of stocking caps, dancing sugarplum fairies, and a jolly old elf with sacks of toys. We think in any number of images garnered from Christmas TV specials or movies- Scrooge being rousted out of bed by ghosts; the Grinch stealing the Who's Christmas in the dead of night; a forlorn Little Drummer boy following the Wise men as they gazed into the night sky. The darkness of Night- now that's a powerful image.

We tend to forget that Jesus was born into a dark world. That before there can be Christmas day; there must first be the Night before Christmas. And what a Night it was. Rome had morphed from a limited democratic Republic into an Empire- controlled by the ego demands of one man- Caesar. The Roman economy was fueled by the cheap labor of slaves- which in turn sent the Roman armies out in ever widening circles of conquest- in order to feed the fire. Palestine, the Holy Land, was ruled by Herod- a genuine psychopath who had no problem murdering his wife, sons, any and all political prisoners. His will bluntly stated that upon his death- any remained political prisoners should be executed so that the land would mourn his passing. I'm glad to say they didn't obey that one.

People were poor, desperately so. The ruling class gleefully evicted families from their ancestral lands; and forced families that had fallen into debt to sell their children into slavery in order to pay the debts. There were terrorists (they called them bandits) in the hills, plotting for the day they would take on the mighty Empire, but until then mercilessly beating and murdering those who had the misfortune to cross their paths. The Zealots were busy fanning the flames of religious extremism in order to recruit youths for suicidal attacks. The Taliban had nothing on these guys

This was the world Jesus was born into- born in an insignificant corner of the empire- born that there may one day be light. The Light of Righteousness

based on God's incredible love and grace. Yes, it was the Night before Christmas.

Doesn't sound like much has changed in the last couple of thousand years, does it? For the first time since late Medieval times, religious fervor has emerged as a political force. Whether it is the Europeans banning head scarves, Islamic fundamentalists killing movie directors and threatening cartoonists; whether it is home grown terrorists caught by the FBI building bombs for Allah, or those doing their best to kill our troops in Afghanistan & Iraq; Islamic fundamentalism dominates the news. There are even demands for local Sharia Law in Canada and the UK; to say nothing of the rising anti Christian persecution in Muslim lands. Even Hindu fundamentalists in India are jumping the "Kill the Christian" bandwagon. As Americans, we just don't get the hatred that religious war generates in places like Pakistan and India.

Darkness is even making a comeback in the entertainment field. I don't begin to get the fascination with vampires and werewolves. Actually I do get it- the ever popular Twilight series is equal parts doomed loved story ala Romeo & Juliet and a story of redemption. Oddly enough, it is not the human heroine Bella who is redeemed; it is the vampire Edward. Normally, we would consider vampires and werewolves cursed- yet in this current season the undead are simply immortal. Who says that Darkness isn't romantic? Romantic as it may be, without the hint of light that hope of redemption brings, there would not be much of a story here, at least not the one that compels this kind of fan base.

The all time classic use of Darkness as a character (outside of ghost movies) has to be Lord of the Rings Trilogy. It is the constant unnamed character that is out there. To be fair, both Tolkein and the movie director Alan Jackson used Darkness as the backdrop to highlight the power of the forces of good. Tolkein, was very clear on that in later interviews. He wanted to show that darkness and despair are always ultimately trumped by the forces of light – and hope.

In this, Tolkein was informed by the Gospel. Jesus lived among us; taught his disciples, was executed by the powers of Darkness and rose again in the light

of Easter morning. Within a generation his disciples were found in every corner of the Empire, working to bring His light to a hopeless world. Lives were changed- things got better. Christians were to be found at the fore front of every movement to improve life. Hospitals, schools, you name it-within a handful of generations the Roman Empire was transformed.

Jesus is still active among us. Jesus is still the light against the Dark. It strikes me that light is a wonderful image- for light is active- it seeks out every nook and cranny of despair and hopelessness in order to chase out the shadows. Light seeks to replace despair with hope, and to transform cynicism with faith. Ultimately Light is an extension of God Himself. John's gospel links light with creation speaking of the role of Jesus in creation, John says *what has come into being with him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Tonight is the Night before Christmas- but it is not the Darkness before the Light. It really doesn't matter what's on the evening news- because we already know that God's light trumps the darkness every time. We already know that Jesus is still active- we experience this every time we take our place with those who have gone before.

Our favorite Christmas stories may start in Darkness, <u>yet each one celebrates God's redemption in the light</u>. Whether it is Scrooge's turning over a new leaf, or the Grinch getting a new heart that is now no longer 2 sizes too small- all of that happens in the light of Christmas morning. Tonight, when we take our candles, each one lit from the light of our neighbor-this is not an empty ritual- this is a bold statement of how God operates in our world and that we have a place in His plans.

Merry Christmas, may God bless and keep us, every one.