

One Christmas Eve, when I was about ten,
 I was a candle-bearer in our service,
 which meant I got to carry in and carry out a *big* pillar candle
 and place it in a stand next to the altar,
 a special task done only on Christmas Eve.
 But at the end of the service, my candle got stuck in its holder.
 I couldn't get it out.

The music was playing and the other candle-bearer had her candle out
 and she was moving down the aisle already,
 so I just gave it big *YANK* and, sure enough, out it came . . .
 along with all its hot wax,
 which landed *SPLAT* on my forehead
 and started dripping down into my eyebrow and eyelashes
 all the way down the aisle.

I was just barely at the back doors
 when a group of older ladies pounced on me.
 They whisked me into a small room off the side of our sanctuary—
 there was a sink and lots of linens and stuff for communion—
 and they began patting my forehead with wet cloths.

I had never met these ladies before, nor had I ever been in that little room.
 Because typically, the Christmas Eve candle-bearers
 didn't have anything to do
 with the Altar Guild.
 And ten-year-olds were not supposed to be in the sacristy.
 But that night, the candle, the light
 brought us all together.

*

Christmas Eve is the *one* worship service a year
 when the church puts lighting candles—
 something usually reserved for specially trained assistants—
 into everybody's hands.
 If you grew up going to church on Christmas Eve in North America
 chances are you have some memorable stories about these thin little candles.

I asked my husband if he had any fond

Christmas Eve candle-lighting memories
 and he recalled the first Christmas we were married.
 I was assisting at St. Mark's Lutheran in Luray,
 and he was sitting with my family-of-origin.
 When the candles were lit,
 my husband and my brother began messing with each other's lights.
 My dad shot them a fatherly side-eye and said,
 "Cut it out, you two!"
 And inside, my husband happily thought,
I'm finally in the family!!

Yes indeed, our tradition of lighting little candles on Christmas Eve
 has a way of bringing everyone together:
 Ten-year-olds with the Altar Guild.
 New husbands and father-in-laws.
 And while we can't be certain that there were candles
 in the stable on that First Christmas night,
 we do know
 that God's Light
 brought
 people
 together.

*

Consider the shepherds.
 In Luke's Gospel
 the shepherds are the first to see the Light.
 And shepherds are not accustomed
 to much light.
 They live in the fields, Luke reports,
 keeping watch over their flocks by night.
 They're used to grazing land far out in the country,
 where people don't often come.
 The countryside darkness in which these shepherds live and work
 separates them from other people.
 These shepherds get left out of the brightest parts of society:
 they live in the part of town without street lights;
 they work the night shift;

they are the people who take care of other people's property
on other people's land.

On top of that,
it's a smelly job.
The shepherds are not very cleanly people;
they are not mainstream people;
they aren't considered very dignified.
In the Christmas Gospel,
the shepherds represent the underbelly of society:
the people left out in the dark,
literally and metaphorically,
by the luminaries and standards of their day.

But God changes all that.

Because that night, something happens in the darkness.
A light shines.
Luke calls this light-shining-the-darkness, "[t]he glory of the Lord":
"The glory of the Lord shone around them."

Now "[t]he glory of the Lord" isn't an easy thing to describe or define,
even with other Biblical passages to help out,
because the Glory of the Lord is no ordinary light.
It has no typical shine or luster.
It's more of a you-know-it-when-you-see-it phenomenon.
And that night, the shepherds sure do see and experience
its brilliance and luminance.

The Glory of the Lord comes and shines *around* the shepherds.
It doesn't shine *on* them or *in front* of them or *behind* them.
But radiates around them.
God's light surrounds them.
God's light embraces them.
Encompasses them.
Drives out the shadows that haunt their nights,
and encircles them,
includes them,
brings them, collectively,

together.

Then, this light shining around them,
this Glory of the Lord,
turns them toward others.

The angel bids them, "Go."
Go to the city of David, to Bethlehem.
Waiting for you there is "a child
 wrapped in bands of cloth
 and lying in a manger."

And this child is
a Savior,
 the Messiah,
 the Lord.

Perhaps they think it's some kind of mistake:
that this Light comes and sends them into the city,
where they usually do not trod.
The light surrounds them and invites them to Bethlehem,
to seek out strangers they typically would not be found with.
This Light comes and bids them to go find
someone so unlike them:
a pure newborn child,
a shining Savior.

And when they go
they find this simple scene of familial love;
they find this sure sign of humanity,
this new life, born of God.
When those shepherds find Jesus,
they behold the light shining in the darkness:
a baby who brings the world from division to wholeness;
a child who connects all kinds of people to one another and to God;
a new life who makes strangers into friends,
 turns shepherds into prophets
 and changes an unwed couple into The Holy Family.
For this baby that the shepherds find
bears the Glory of the Lord and the Light of God.
This Jesus is the Light of the World.

*

Like the shepherds on that First Christmas Night,
 we have come to witness this Glory.
 And the church does so not only
 through the glorious words of Luke's Gospel
 and the wondrous gift of the Bread of Life
 but also through the tradition of candle-lighting.

At the end of the service, when we pass the flame
 one-by-one down each row,
 the Light of Christ
 doesn't shine only on us or in front of us or behind us.
 It radiates *around* us.
 God's Light embraces us and encompasses us.
 Encircling us all collectively,
 together.

And when we tilt the unlit candles and pass the light
 from neighbor to neighbor,
 God's Light invites us to turn to folks we may typically not be found with,
 to look into the eyes of someone unlike us,
 or to look differently at someone we know so well.
 When we pass that light, divisions, if only for a moment, cease.
 It doesn't matter if you're young or old,
 rich or poor, healthy or sick—
 everyone receives the Light.

When we pass that light,
 the argument you had with your spouse over holiday plans
 fades into the darkness.
 The anger you feel at your parents or your kids
 scurries into the shadows.
 The disappointments or isolation of the season
 creep off into the night.
 And the Light of Christ—
 the light that no darkness can overcome—
 overtakes us all
 and overtakes

all of us.

And then, like the shepherds,
we go.
Having come to worship this child,
having seen the Glory of the Lord surround us
and having witnessed the Light of Christ,
now we carry that light.
We are lit by a spark of that Glory,
and so, with Christ,
we can carry light
to people who walk in darkness
and to those who live in a land of deep darkness.
God's Light
having brought us together,
God's Light goes with us and goes on
still bringing the world together.

AMEN.