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“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:1).

Christmas Gospels: Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-18

The timely alignment of Saturn and Pluto this week offered our Covid-weary planet a reminder of how important light is to human survival. Our planet depends on our position in the solar system for life, warmth and food, but we also need the light of understanding to align our human world to the physical and moral universe we live in. A light in the night sky humbles us and invites us to ponder life’s persistent questions and the many stories that give motive and meaning to our shared existence on earth.

Christmas walks us from darkness to light with three masses at different times. The vigil mass has angels from on high appear in the night sky to lowly shepherds to reveal that heaven has come to earth in the birth of a child in Bethlehem. The dawn mass shows them welcoming the child. They are the first evangelists among the poor. The mass during the day proclaims John’s majestic prologue on the meaning of the light that has come into the world. We need this light to see the events we celebrate made visible for us by faith.

Luke’s infancy story subverts the presumptions of earthly power. He dupes Caesar Augustus by having his imperial decree send Joseph from Nazareth to Judea to fulfill the prophecy that Jesus be born in Bethlehem of the house of David. Higher powers are at work than in palaces. The child lying in a manger surrounded by hill country shepherds is the true ruler and savior of the world.

Mary is Luke's witness who "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." What better way to know Christmas than to see it through the eyes and heart of Mary? The word "glory" is used repeatedly, another name for "revelation," an eye-opening, soul-pondering insight about what is happening even if it is invisible to physical sight. The shepherds know. Mary and Joseph know, and Luke invites us to know this glorious story from inside the mystery of the Incarnation.

How each of us celebrates Christmas depends on where we are in the progression from darkness to light, where we choose to enter the story with faith about its importance for us. How does the birth of this child enlighten my own questions about the meaning of life? Has the darkness sharpened my longing for light and has the pandemic deepened my solidarity with others? What does it mean for my ordinary efforts that Jesus is my human brother inviting me to join him in the harness of humility and meekness, showing me the power of compassion to change the world one person at a time? We might wish to escape this world, but we would meet Jesus going in the opposite direction to embrace our humanity. Heaven has come to earth; God is with us. Being fully human is our path to glory.

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