A Light Shined In the Darkness – Advent part one

1. Within days of the recent election, and perhaps even a day or so before it, I witnessed something I'd not seen in our neighborhood before. People were already putting up Christmas lights. Normally, that is an invitation to people to sneer and insist that we wait until after Thanksgiving but, during most of November, I saw few of those kinds of posts.

2. Why the change? I think we all needed the lights. We needed Christmas. We needed to turn our heads away from the 24/7 news cycle and the fear-mongers we call media, both mainstream and social. Any light in the darkness, any reminder of something other than division, conflict, family fights, and economic uncertainty was welcome…and remains welcome.

3. Christmas is an odd holiday. It is the only major religious holiday that is also a major secular holiday. Easter is far more religious than secular even though some offices take a day off. Christmas is where our retail and commercial enterprises see if they will live or die. Billions are exchanged. Families gather, people hit the shops or online, all the while being serenaded by a strange brew of songs, one minute extolling that Jesus "came to give us second birth" and the next, "All I want for Christmas is you."

4. If we do all the hard work of stripping the secular out of the holiday, we are still left with two very odd facts: many Christians decry any celebration of Christmas, claiming that it is an old, pagan holiday. Second, most historians believe that Jesus was born in the Spring so why are we celebrating his birth on the 25th?

5. To answer the objection and the question, we have to go back to the reality of the new faith, Christianity. It was born 2000 years ago, formed around the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem of Judea, an insignificant backwater of the Roman Empire. With no special training, status, wealth, or position, he gathered an assortment of men to teach them the ways of the Lord. Many women joined them and we even see in the scriptures that woman, by and large, supplied the funds for his ministry.

6. His ministry caused anger and angst among the religious leaders of the day. Even while the common people heard him gladly and people traveled to meet him wherever he was, those in power were aghast and plotted how to end him. Eventually, they handed him over to Rome and accused him of breaching the peace of Rome. He was crucified like countless thousands of others.

7. And then he arose on the third day. He spent a little over a month with his followers and then ascended into heaven, promising his return to us one day.

8. Now, his band of followers found themselves in a precarious position. They were a new faith imbedded in an old faith, Judaism. The roots of the faith were absolutely Jewish and most of the Christians were Jews for a long time. After the fall of Jerusalem, the persecuted Christians fled to other areas of the empire and, perhaps, beyond taking their faith with them.

9. They were a faith without a government to back them up, license them, give them permission to build meeting locations or homes for their leaders. I cannot emphasize enough how strange that was in the ancient world or how vulnerable that made them…but they were bold and open in their faith and they took God's charge to redeem the world very seriously.

10. When they encountered anything in nature, they used it to illustrate the truths of scripture and the wisdom of God. When they came across pagan shrines, they would bless them and turn them into stories about the Christian faith. Often, their bold faith brought them into sharp conflict with the authorities but it also brought them into conflict with the common people. They were attached to their gods and stories, after all.

11. One of the phrases I say to myself frequently is "There is another way to tell that story." It is a way of looking at something in a different light, of deescalating a situation, or a reframing, a reimagining of something that has troubled me. Close to that is another phrase I use on myself but also ask others: "Is there another way to say that?"

12. Christians heard the pagan stories and saw the pagan altars, wells, shrines, and totems every single day. They did not doubt that powerful forces were out there in the air and among us. They did not doubt that some people found healing and solace from this well's water or their offering at the foot of a totem. However, they believed that every good and perfect gift comes from God, the Father of…. (wait for it) Light." They retold the stories giving credit to the One God Who Is.

13. There are literally thousands of illustrations of this reframing and retelling of old stories. If you find any Christian shrines or wells, the odds are that they used to be dedicated to another spirit or deity. Christians came along, retold the stories giving glory to God, and used what was right there in front of everyone to take them from there to Jesus, rather like Philip did with the Queen's Treasurer. "Starting there, he taught him about Jesus."

14. There were several celebrations around the end of December but the one we most often reference is Saturnalia. The Romans believed that the world was once an orderly and wonderful place ruled by the god, Saturn. By the time of Jesus, the celebration of Saturn ran seven days, ending on December 23rd. Gifts were exchanged, songs were sung, and general merriment was had by both lords and the poor.

15. Bookmark that for a moment. We'll come back to it. In the Northern Empire and beyond lay very dark lands. They were dark literally during the winter months and suffered a series of little Ice Ages. They were also dark in that they worshipped violent and combative gods who reveled in killing and blood. Their languages were mysterious and they were considered barbarians.

16. The Northern people did not consider themselves barbarians, of course. This was all they knew. Their stories of gods reflected the nasty, brutish and short nature of life as they experienced it. They were hunters and gathers but not farmers as the short growing season didn't lend itself to planting and harvesting great fields of grain. They stored everything they could against the coming of the darkness when, for months at a time, they would huddle in their huts

or longhouses, filled with smoke from fires made with sticks and animal waste or peat.

17. To kill the time, they told stories. No wonder that some of their sagas go on for hours and hours: they had the time to tell them again and again until all knew them by heart.

18. In the middle of this oppressive and deadly time we call winter, they would notice that the sunrise, when observable, was slightly earlier than before as it skated just above the horizon. To encourage the sun to come back and to encourage all to hold on for warmer days, they would celebrate. To encourage the gods of the light to return, they would light their precious lamps and burn a Yule log on the fire. They would share gifts with each other – exceedingly precious gifts of bits of food, needles for sewing, bits of cloth.

19. Now, back to the Christians. Christians told those celebrating Saturn of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of the God who came to earth to bring us a golden age of faith, love, mercy kindness, sharing, and caring for all. Slowly, more and more began to celebrate Jesus rather than Saturn. Eventually, the story of his birth was connected to the new hope, the new story, the Christians brought for, without the Advent, without the stable and the manger and the angels singing in chorus, there would be no story to tell at all! It all began there in Bethlehem.

20. The common people loved this story for it wasn't about a time of joy for a few days and then back to the grinding poverty that made their lives so miserable. It wasn't a story for the rich and powerful that left out the poor and forgotten. No! It elevated the poor and spoke of a God who saw the ones no one else sees, Who loves the ones no one else will love. A God who cares about them…personally. THAT was revolutionary.

21. Later, as Christians moved north, they encountered the Gauls, Celts, Scandinavians, Picts, Jutes, Angles, British and more. They told them about a light that had come one night, of the song sung by angels, about a God who loved them.

22. About light. The world is a dark place and we will never find our way through it without Christ. (Isaiah 9:2,5-7) John puts it this way: “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.”

23. John goes on to frame his gospel as this light moving against the darkness.

24. I think that is why the lights came out earlier this year. I think that is the reason my heart leaps with joy when I see the first Christian display of the season, even if it is months ahead of the season! I know that most displays in the stores are there for commercial purposes. I know that many of those around me see this as a secular holiday only. I know that Disney parades won’t even mention Jesus nor will many local parades.

25. But there will be lights. And that gives us a chance to tell the story of the night when the sky was filled with angels and shepherds heard the Good News: Peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

26. Prayer thanking God for the light.