

I have a vitamin D deficiency. I need light. Lots, and lots of light. Without it, I become lethargic, depressed, disoriented, even. And this time of year is when I feel it most. Growing up, I would do anything and everything I could think of to keep the Christmas tree from coming down. January would come and go, and the tree would remain. It was a long, long time before I realized that my need for light and my clinging to the Christmas tree are bound up together.

Advent is so full of anticipation, preparation, and expectation. There isn't time to notice that the days are getting shorter, the ground harder, the sky more steely. From Halloween on, it is one giant party, until New Year's Day, when all of the evergreens start to come down, the lights go away, and we agree to grit our teeth and wait for spring, when things will be new and exciting again.

But that really can't be right, certainly not theologically speaking. Advent is our time of preparation, and in God's infinite wonder it cannot be that we are preparing for Emmanuel, God with us, only so we can hunker down together and pray it will be over soon. That just cannot be right. We have prepared for the coming of peace, and for the ability to know it when we see it.

I used to look for light in ways that made no sense. It is natural light that gives the vitamin D my body so craves. Not more light, but real light. I know this, but I still sometimes walk into very bright places – department stores, even grocery stores, and have a momentary light-high. It doesn't last. In fact, it will often begin to give me a raging headache before long. Because it is the wrong kind of light, but my brain is so easily fooled. I don't always know how to tell real light from the bright fluorescent meant to simulate it.

And in my clinging to dried out Christmas trees, I have come to see that I have been so determined to hang on to the commercialized Christmas, the

yuletide carols and the halls decked with holly, that I squeezed out much of the real beauty of the Christmas season.

We have so surrounded ourselves with fluorescent light and hallmark holidays that it has become painful for us to sit in more authentic spaces. We have come to equate dark with bad, and sad, to see bright as happy and full of life. But what if, in being focused on making everything bright we have really just bathed our lives in a wash of headache inducing fluorescence?

Christ is born in a nowhere outside of a backwater town, not even in a house. He is raised in poverty, on the run, nomadic and shunned. His people are conquered. His land is overrun. All, it would seem, is lost. Everything is bleak, and cold and hopeless. But, if you turn that on its head, according to the Romans, they were offering up something much like our hallmark holiday: the safety and security of one impregnable empire where, once you submit to it, there will be no more war or strife. The possibility of rising – unlikely, but possible – to gain citizenship and wealth by following the rules of that system. Play along, and you will have security, prosperity, food and shelter. If you bought into this idea, the future under Rome would have seemed as bright as any Target in December.

What if we have it wrong? What if Jesus wasn't a light in the darkness, what if he was a dark in the lightness? What if Jesus was the spot of truth and authenticity in a wash of fake, fluorescent light? The reminder that this was not the sun, this was not the truth, the whole story of life under Rome was as false as tube lighting, no matter how high the wattage?

New things are almost never born in the light. They begin in the dark. They germinate there, grow and form there. They are needed there, and because, in the dark, no one has been blinded by the false, fake light, it is so much easier to

see them. Tulip bulbs began putting out roots in November, and have been opening up and growing all winter long. They are growing just fine in the darkness, quietly nurtured by the low light of winter. Babies form fingers, toes, and smiles in the watery darkness of the womb. They need, among other things, the vitamin d their mothers will get from sunlight, but they are only alarmed by the bright lights of hospitals into which they are born. They were just fine in the dark. The freedom and liberty on which we pride ourselves was born in the dark of a tyrannical monarchy – and I would say it thrived most in the space right after the greatest darkness, before the false light of partisan rhetoric was blasting out the land. A spirit of revolution needed the dark, probably more than the light it is now led by. The church grew in the dark – the community of Acts, the early Christians, brave and faithful, they worshiped in secret, they had the benefit of clear forces to push against.

But wait. That very darkness of empire was sold as light, remember? The false prophet of prosperity was – is – everywhere. In being blinded by all of these bright lights, we are failing to see Christ. So, as much as it feels like this is the season to hunker down, the opposite is true. This is the time to use all of those advent preparations in the service of seeing the true light and not being blinded by all the false brightness. Jesus tells us not to hide our light under a bushel. He does not say the light is not a light under a bushel. It is. But if we brought the true light of Christ within ourselves out into the open, who would choose the fluorescence instead?

If we want to celebrate epiphany, we will need to turn off our lights to adjust our eyes to God's lights. And for a while, we will feel blind, might even be convinced we have made a terrible mistake. We will have to let the eyes of our

souls adjust. At first, people are going to perceive this as a dark in the lightness. We who carry the true light will not be welcomed. We will be seen as a fly in the ointment. Those of us who carry this truer, richer light will be called the burster of bubbles, Buzz-killers. We will be tempted, even, to say these things about ourselves, so confusing is the false light we have come to know in the world. We must not.

We must remind ourselves and all we meet that this light we are used to is not real, and that what is really good is biding its time, poised and ready, out of sight but not outside of Emmanuel.

Fluorescent light sees the surface of things. It is so bright, it is trying so hard to convince you that it is real it leaves no room for shadows. Christ light has nothing to prove but much more to reveal. It shows the shadows, the nuances, the deep and complex places.

Over the next several weeks, as the Christmas lights go away but the flowers have not yet broken through the soil, try deciding to be the dark in the lightness. The hidden truth that is precious and special, needed and urgent. Try revealing those truths in your words and in your deeds. Try being deliberate about what light it is that you want to bask in.

Christ was born into a world where there was tremendous pressure to say that everything was fine and the system was working. A world with a powerful array of false light, and yet for so many something about it felt...off. Even if they couldn't precisely name what was wrong, they could sense it. Some of them closed their eyes, found the light inside themselves, and reopening their eyes had to shout a warning that as bright as this all seemed it was not of God! This is what

epiphany means. To see the dark in the lightness and live a life that shows an alternative.