

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time A

21 years ago, a handful of members of the Lincoln and Omaha astronomy clubs got together to plan a gathering of the state's astronomers for a week of observing, lectures and general, over-all geekness.

We looked at a satellite picture of the United States at night to find the darkest accessible place in Nebraska that could hold all 20 of us and our families. We settled on the southernmost portion of Merritt Reservoir 30 miles below Valentine. As it turned out, this was actually the darkest accessible spot in the nation. By our third year, the gathering had swollen to over 400 people from all over the world. It was time to sit down and make some rules. Now, the rules were really just proper astronomer etiquette. The most serious rule was the use of any type of light other than red lights within 5 miles of the observing area after observing had begun was forbidden. Why? The human eye is capable of seeing extremely faint light, which is exactly what many distant galaxies and such are, just faint wisps of light. But in order to see them, one had to have their eyes "dark-adapted". This can take up to an hour in the dark for most people. Now red light doesn't seem to affect that dark adaptation - but, once the eyes are regulated, it takes only a spark, a small flick of a flashlight or a cigarette lighter to destroy it and the hour started from scratch. And because it was so dark out there, you really could see a campfire or a street light 5 miles away and it could have an effect on your vision. But because we were all gathered for the same purpose, it was a pretty easy rule to follow.

However, there was one guy who sat down on his car keys and his headlights blinked. People were upset, but we forgave him. Afterall, it was just an accident.

But when it happened a second time, I thought there might be a lynching! Good thing that trees are scarce in that part of the sandhills. Imagine the

headlines..."Nerds Figure Out How to Make a Noose from Spare Computer Cable"

The point of that story was to illustrate something we don't really think about much - darkness is actually very fragile. And those that seek the darkness will do all they can to keep it dark.

Today is the Feast of the Presentation. Since the fourth century or so it was known as Candlemas. That was because, in a time when Churches and Homes were lit by lamps and candles, all of the candles that would be used in the next year would be blessed during Mass.

The Readings and, indeed the prayers of today's Liturgy are laden with images of light and redemption and glory - all in the breaking and overcoming of darkness.

The Christ-Child is called "a light of revelation to the Gentile nations", "A sign of contradiction". "The glory of Israel."

Those who operate in darkness, whether that be physical darkness or the mental and spiritual darkness of hatred, evil and ignorance will become accustomed and even comfortable in that darkness. And we naturally protect our comfort, don't we?

Like the headlights of that astronomer's car, Jesus shatters darkness of our hearts and minds, and we are forced to look at the contradictions of our own lives in that light.

What it is we protect, what it is we hold in the shadows so that the light won't overcome it, these are the revelations of our many hearts.

It is easy to stand here and preach the light of Christ and the darkness of those who do not know him. But the truth is, we do not live in that same

darkness any more. Christ has come, they thought they snuffed out His living light on the Cross, but He rose again, conquering sin and death with unconquerable light.

Today, 2000 years later, we live in a more global society that has seen the light and has at times embraced it. There have been periods of darkness, sure, some very recently. But today we stand at a time when the differences between dark and light are blurred.

Rather than overcome the darkness with light, we clothe our darkness' in light. We take the life of an innocent baby in the womb and call it compassion for the mother. We destroy human embryos, in petri dishes and call it a search for a cure.

Politicians call for immigration and health care reform but but what we end up with is not reform, but the imposition of a particular ideology in the name of keeping our country strong. And we send the strong and young of our nation to die in a religious war to topple governments, but we tell ourselves it is a war on terrorism. While at home we redefine our own religious liberties to the point that they are neither religious nor liberty, just something between you and God.

The good news of the Gospel is that the light has come, it came to shatter the darkness and it has shattered the darkness. We may have allowed darkness to be called light - but we know the difference. We know the difference because we have seen the light in the face of a newly baptized child, we have touched the light every time we step up when our friends or neighbors need a hand. We have heard the words of light in the words of scripture and we are clothed in light in the Sacraments. We are Christians, and we are children of the light. We should never be the guy who accidentally sits on his keys, but the one who boldly shines the light of truth where it needs to be seen, always in charity, even if it might make some people want to lynch us.

Remember, darkness is fragile. It takes only a spark to dispel it. Our faith is not meant to be a private affair practiced behind closed doors at home or on a Sunday morning in a particular building at a particular time. Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world - but only so much as we have our identity in Christ. Without Him, whatever light we have is like a candle in the wind, a flame that burns for a short while and then goes dark. In the end, just so much wasted wax and wick.

Let us then, claim Christ as He has claimed us and be a beacon of light for all to see.