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Title: Reflecting the Light

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Scripture: [John 1:1-5](#)

Text: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

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Here we are on the second Sunday of Advent. As it began last week, we had a wonderful worship service talking about all of the distractions and activities which get in the way of finding Christmas. Many of you connected with my experience of sitting next to a couple of women while traveling to New York City. They hoped

to find Christmas by going to Rockefeller Center, seeing all of the department stores and lights and going to Christmas shows. One said, "According to Facebook, you were sitting next to my friends Kellie and Kim." I wasn't. One of our board members said, "Hey I did that trip and most of those things the day after you were there." Another family who used to live in New Jersey said, "That's how we always found Christmas."

I suppose it's not surprising and that was the point. We live in a culture driven by Christmas frivolity and feasting, by a proclivity to overindulge and overspend, by many activities, habits, and traditions which are called Christmas but really have nothing to do with Jesus' birth. Advent is different than those celebrations. Advent speaks to preparing the hearts of believers, turning us into people who look more like Jesus. It is about asking the Holy Spirit to come into our souls, transform and sanctify us by shining the light into darkness found there.

It is why the first week of Advent always focuses on hope, the hope in Isaiah's Promise of Light. He said: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2)

To prepare for that light, to receive that light once again, we have to focus our attention and our memory. If we do, that light will not just be experienced. It will be joyfully shared and multiplied. That was last week and the first step in making Advent a meaningful way to prepare for Christmas light.

This week, I want to center our thinking on reflecting the light and point to possibly the first person to reflect Christmas light, Joseph. His remarkable story gives us clues on how to respond to the challenge. Do you know that? We are challenged to reflect light. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others." (Matthew 5:14a, 15b) Peter said, we "...are called out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) Paul said that "as children of God children...shine like stars in the world." (Philippians 2:15)

Reflecting light has a scientific name. It's called albedo. If you are into astronomy and good at Jeopardy, you know that already. Albedo is the word for the amount of light reflected off objects that don't have the ability to shine on their own, planets, moons, and asteroids. The sun shines, and the moon and the planets reflect the sun's light. Venus has a high albedo. Because it orbits close to the sun, it soaks up and reflects 65% of the light that shines on it. It is why on a clear night, you can almost always find Venus shining brightly in the western sky. Oddly, the moon has a very low albedo, about 7% on average. It's a little counter-intuitive because we think of the moon, particularly when the moon is in a full phase and the sky is clear as bright. But not so much closer to us than the sun which affects its illumination. And, the atmosphere works against it, like a dimmer switch shutting it down. Astronauts report that the moon appears 30% brighter in outer space. A planet that is perfect at reflecting light would have an albedo of 1 or 100%; one which is completely dark, reflecting no light is a 0 or zero percent. Actually, there are no surfaces that are 100% or 0% but something in between. ¹

The same can be said of you. You have a spiritual albedo. Challenged to be the light of the world, to shine like stars in the heaven, you have a number. What might it be? What's your spiritual albedo? Are you more like Venus at 65% or more like the moon, at 7%? How much sun light, how much of God's light do you reflect?

That's an important thing to remember. Just as with celestial objects, you don't have an inherent capacity to shine on your own. You only have the capacity to reflect light and that light is God's light. It's not your own personal light. How much of the light of Christ do you reflect? A little or a lot? ²

I think Joseph had a high spiritual albedo. This is what we are told in the gospel of Matthew. Scripture says, "Joseph was a righteous man." Sometimes it is translated "just" "Joseph was a just man." There is a rich history behind this idea. The Hebrew word for a righteous or just man is

tsaddîyq. He was completely obedient to scripture. He lived in it and knew it by heart. He didn't bend the rules or mix with the wrong kind of people. He was faithful. He kept the Sabbath, had a rich prayer life, he was committed to worship and giving an offering. Joseph was full of grace, honorable. People knew they could trust him. He was admired and looked up to because he was righteous. He was obedient, faithful, full of grace and honorable and whenever he walked through Nazareth, people could see God's light reflected in him. ³

I thought about this when we visited Nazareth on Halloween. It's a tiny place, no bigger than ten acres or so, just about the size of our Mud Creek campus. Maybe 100-150 people living in family groups. The tour guide said, "Everybody was in everybody's business." And everybody in everybody's business knew that Joseph was a righteous man, a just man. If you are obedient, faithful, dependable and honorable, you will reflect God's light. Joseph had a high spiritual albedo. Then he didn't.

I may be reading something into the text, but I don't think so because I think I know something about spiritual albedos. We can be reflecting God's light all around us and then, something happens, something difficult, something hurtful or unfair occurs and suddenly, darkness shows up. It's like a hand reach out to an invisible dimmer switch on our soul and turns down the light. This happens a lot when someone hurts you when someone one does something to you that is unfair when someone wounds you. I think you know this. Let me ask you. When someone hurts you, or hurts your spouse, or hurts your kids when someone deeply wounds you or yours, what's your first inclination? Is it to say, "Wow, I really want to shine the light of Christ right now?" Or is it to go to a dark place, to grab hold of the dimmer on our soul and turn it down? I know what I do. I think I know what you do. I think this was exactly what happened to Joseph.

You know how the story goes. "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child." (Matthew 1:18) This isn't good. Mary and Joseph weren't engaged like people are engaged today. It was a betrothal. A betrothal was a contractual agreement, an actual first step in marriage. You had all the rights and obligations of marriage except for conjugal rights. You didn't consummate the marriage. And a betrothal wasn't easily broken, you couldn't just take a ring off your finger. It requires a divorce.

Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. What does Joseph know about this baby? Joseph knows just one thing. He's not the father. What do you think he feels? He's not just hurt. He's wounded, and all sorts of things were going through his head. Mary is unfaithful. She's selfish. She's deceitful.

She's immoral. He had to have been depressed. He felt betrayed and angry. I don't know about you, but when I feel hurt, or wounded or embarrassed, it's dark. All those emotions, all those feelings turn the dimmer switch down. I'm sure that Joseph reached for it and dialed it down, down, way down, but not all the way down.

Maybe you didn't notice it but there is still a little light showing, just a glimmer and we said last week that a glimpse can sometimes be enough. Here's the glimmer of a light. "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." (Matthew 1:19) That's not much light but it is there. Being a righteous man, Joseph knows the scripture. He knows Deuteronomy 22 and he knows that a strict interpretation of infidelity during the betrothal period could lead to Mary stoned her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house and Deuteronomy said, "You must purge this evil from among you." By the first century, the rabbis were suggesting that stoning wasn't the best course of action. Instead, there was a very public shaming, where instead of throwing stones, people threw insults, heaped on shame and humiliation. And it never ended. Mary would carry the burden of shame her entire life, the labels of unfaithful, selfish, deceitful and immoral.

So, Joseph planned to dismiss her, divorce her quietly. He wasn't going to use the Bible to hurt her. People do that when they are angry. They use the Bible like a weapon. Not Joseph. He was too good, too just, too righteous to do that.

Night comes, and Joseph goes to his home, his room and embraces the darkness, both the darkness of Nazareth and the darkness he was facing. Remember, there aren't any light bulbs in the first century. No ambient light shining from street lights outside. At best, there was the albedo of the moon but likely, it was dark. But there was the darkness of feeling betrayed and wounded and that's even darker.

Have you ever noticed when you are feeling angry or wounded, you feel it disproportionately at night? Do you have the experience when you are struggling with something hard, suffering through it, you sleep but don't really sleep, because it's working on you. Or you wake up and you can't go back to sleep and you are going over and over it in your head. I don't know about you but some of my darkest, saddest moments occur during the night.⁴

There is a reason for this. We have an assumption. We have this assumption that if it's dark, God's not working. We assume that evil owns

the dark, anger owns the dark, and suffering owns the dark. We think that darkness is so powerful that God can't even get in. But that's not what scripture says. Scripture says "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5) It is the promise of Jesus coming and this light was about to shine in the darkness for the first time.

Joseph tossing and turning, working it over has a dream. You know it by heart. The angel of the Lord comes to Joseph and says, "Hey Joe. I understand you've heard some disturbing news lately. Mary's pregnant. Well, listen up. This child is of divine origin. He is being sent to redeem humanity. And as good as you are, as righteous and just as you are, you couldn't do that. Only God can do this. "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins...name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:21-23b)

I think at that very moment, Joseph woke himself up because he couldn't sleep any longer. The room was too bright. He was aglow, a spiritual albedo that was off the charts, maybe almost like Moses, who had to wear a veil over his face because he reflected so much light. I'm sure the first thing he thought was, "I knew something wasn't right. Mary's not unfaithful, selfish, deceitful, or immoral. Mary is obedient, faithful, full of grace and honorable. And those are the very labels that Luke uses to describe Mary during the Annunciation.

Those labels about Mary that would have been used to shame and humiliate Mary, to heap darkness on her for the rest of her life, they weren't lost. They were still used. Because Joseph "... did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son... (Matthew 1:25) That meant all of those labels, all of the darkness, all of the insults and shame was placed on Joseph. They became his. Nazareth didn't talk about Mary. Joseph, because everybody was in everybody's business, people talked about Joseph. You got busy a little early, didn't you? You aren't so righteous after all. You know that's not the commandment. What happens? Joseph transfers the shame and darkness off his wife and takes it on himself. "Joseph knew that if he married her, his friends would never accept his account of what happened. He would not be invited to their homes, he would not be given their business, and he would never again be admired and respected as a lover of the Torah. His whole reputation, the work of a lifetime, would be trashed."⁵

He just took on the darkness upon himself because he knew God was working in it with the light of Christmas. He took on the shame for Jesus. Interesting, isn't it? You know who takes the shame of others. Jesus. That's

what Jesus did for us, bore the shame of our sin that we might experience his glorious light. Like father, like son.⁶

I stood there on the small site of Nazareth and though, wow. Everybody was in everybody's business. I wonder if Joseph ever got past all that shame, got his reputation back. There is something of an answer. About 3 blocks from that 10-acre site of Nazareth sits a convent called the Sisters of Nazareth. Beneath is a tomb that has been venerated since the fourth century. The name of the tomb. The tomb for the just man. You know it has a glow about it, an albedo.⁷

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5) On this second week of Advent, that's good news. No matter what challenges or darkness we face, in Jesus, we can overcome it and find peace with Christmas light.

Hold on to that. Hold on to it tightly. Sooner or later, you'll need it.

¹Lucia, Mike. How Bright is the Moon. <http://www.asterism.org/tutorials/tut26-1.htm>

²Berlin, Tom. Hiding the Light. 12/4/16. <https://www.florisumc.org>

³ Ortberg, J. There's Something About Joseph. Christianity Today.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/november-online-only/cln61127.html>

⁴ Berlin, Tom. Hiding the Light.

⁵ Ortberg, J. There's Something About Joseph.

⁶ Berlin, Tom. Hiding the Light.

⁷ <https://biblewalks.com/sites/SistersNazareth.html>