

How does it feel when the power goes out at night and you're suddenly plunged into darkness? Even the most familiar rooms can offer up hazards as we stumble along to our flashlights or candles. And even though we might not feel afraid, that beam of light provides comfort and a sense of normalcy.

At times, our worlds can be terrible, dark places even when the lights are on. Imagine the darkness of Europe during WWII – especially if you were Jewish or Polish or Romany. Imagine living in Darfur in a place where rape & genocide are daily occurrences. Imagine living in the most powerful nation in the world where prejudice and sensational news reporting can so darken hearts that a clothing choice can lead to suspicion and violence can convince a man that he must use deadly force to protect himself. The darkness can envelope us so completely that it guides our actions to become unspeakable and keeps us from seeing the humanity of others.

This darkness brings fear into our environment and we seek to close our borders and keep to ourselves. Rather than reaching out with love to encompass others, we seek to legislate our values, forcing others to accept what we believe rather than teaching them about God's love and letting that love lead them in paths of righteousness. Rather than compromise and seeking the best solutions for all, we dig in our heels and insist our way or no way, no matter who gets hurt in the process.

Nineteen years ago, Dennis and I were attending an evening service at Saint James Episcopal Church in New London. It was Holy Saturday and baptisms were being performed from Den's infant nephew to adults. At the end of the service, we all lit candles as we do here on Christmas Eve. Rather than extinguishing the candles, we walked down the aisle and carried them out of the church, taking the light of Christ into the spring evening. I watched on the church steps as the candles lit up the night and had an ah-ha moment of how beautiful it was to carry and to follow the light of Christ.

In the darkness, those candles radiated light and love. It washed over you, giving a sense of peace and God's protection. Perhaps that is why we love candlelight vigils after tragedies.

Luke 2:9 states "All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord's glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened." It is frightening when you're first faced with the radiance of God's love for the entire world. After living in darkness for such a long time, the sudden release from fear into love can be overwhelming and not everyone can make the transition. But when you lose yourself into that love, it is life-altering. Just ask Paul about his experience on the road to Damascus.

Choosing to walk in the light of God's love is easy on a beautiful, sunlit morning in the summer when the birds are singing. It's easy to lose yourself in the power of God during a summer thunderstorm with its wild majesty.

Recently, I saw the story of a couple whose teenaged daughter had been killed by her boyfriend. The boyfriend had grown up with their daughter and was like a son to the couple. The relationship between the two young people had become rocky and during an argument, the young woman was killed. Her parents attended the young man's trial, sitting with his parents. Her parents visit him in prison and pray for him. They feel his sentence is just and look forward to the time when he'll be released from prison. I don't know if I could be as generous with my forgiveness if someone hurt one of my daughters. Truly, these amazing people know how to let their light shine.

There are less dramatic ways to follow the light of Christ and let your own light shine, but they can be just as terrifying. Commitment to a church can be scary. Supporting a church means giving them money and volunteering to help. It might be as simple as increasing your church pledge or even making a pledge, but we wonder if we will have enough money to pay the bills or get by if some financial crisis should befall us. It could be as simple as paying our dues to the Connecticut conference, but we think with our church's financial picture, we should keep our money to ourselves.

We do amazing things in this church. We send youth and adults to areas that need help and let them use their skills to make houses more livable. We provide a space for a school readiness program. We support scouting. We provide space for East Hartford Interfaith Ministries and support that group in all of their endeavors, Human Needs, Friendship Center soup kitchen and New Beginnings to help the homeless start over. We visit our sick and our shut-ins and pray for them. We set up a prayer box in our courtyard to accept prayer requests for those in our wider community. We see a need and we respond to the best of our ability.

Coming this fall, we'll have the opportunity to help define how we want First Church's light to shine into the world. It will take a great commitment from all of us to voice our thoughts and visions for the future. It will take a great commitment for all of us to do our part to ensure our future will happen. It will take a great commitment to allow our own lights to shine.

But that's the funny thing about our own lights. Every week, when the deacons carry the light out at the end of the service, we're making a statement, as a church, about how we follow Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Sometimes, the flame is strong and makes it out. Sometimes, it struggles as the forces around it try to put it out. Sometimes, we reach out a hand to lessen the burden on the light. And, sometimes, the light goes out. Isn't that the way it is with all of us? Sometimes we're strong, sometimes we struggle, sometimes we need help and sometimes we fail. But always, the light comes back, just as the candles are lit every week. Because that light is God's commitment to us.