

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018 at St. Anne's Parish, Annapolis
The Rev'd. Timothy J. Mulder, preaching on text John 1: 1-14

It was summer, 1889, in those darkest of hours just before the dawn. He peered through the bars of the window in his room in the asylum at St. Rémy-en-Provence and sat down at the little desk in his room to write a letter to his brother, Theo, describing the magnificence of the morning stars. He wanted to paint them, but was not allowed paint in his room, so he would need to hold on to this moment and paint it later from memory.

Starry Night is often called the greatest painting of Vincent vanGogh. Yet, let's not miss the story here. VanGogh was in southern France because he was unappreciated and unable to earn a living back home in the Netherlands. He was a troubled man in troubled times, and these were the darkest days of his life. But despite that...

What is there that is so special about gathering on a dark night in churches around the globe and down through the centuries on Christmas night?

Maybe part of it has to do with something Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. Taylor says we have a tendency to associate all that is good with lightness and all that is evil and dangerous with darkness. But doesn't God work in the nighttime as well? She invites us to put aside our fears and anxieties and explore all that God has to teach us "in the dark." She invites us to move from our "solar spirituality," and ease toward appreciating a "lunar spirituality", since, like the moon, our experiences of light waxes and wanes. It is often in the darkness that we find courage, we understand the world in new ways, and we feel God's presence with us, guiding through things both seen and unseen. It is often in the dark that God comes to help us find our footing in times of uncertainty, and give us strength to face life's challenges.

On June 6, vanGogh wrote his sister, Willemien, "It often seems to me that the night is even more richly colored than the day..."

We usually talk about the single star that led the wise men to the place of Jesus' birth, but vanGogh depicted not just a single star, but an entire sky of blazing light bursting forth in the darkness. And in his painting, that light is shining not on some actual village, but on an idealized village, a place that might be if life were ever to become all it could be. It was a painting, I believe, of hope.

Christmas is when we dare to imagine how this world might be if we truly receive the light that comes in our darkness. This world continues to be a place of divisions, even in families and among nations. Wars, poverty, sickness, starvation, greed and pride still surround us, like the darkness of that village in the painting. But the light has to be personal. We have to claim it for ourselves and become it ourselves.

This past summer, Bishop Sutton and his wife, Sonya, and my wife, Linda and I stood on the spot where vanGogh painted Starry Night. We stopped for a moment to pray for this world in its division and suffering. And we gave thanks for the light we know came into the world, not only long ago in Bethlehem, but even to a disturbed man in 1889, and to us in 2018. My prayer is that whenever we go out into the night, whenever we are in dark moments in our lives, we will remember that it is in the darkness that we can see the stars most clearly, and it will remind us we are not alone.

The light that lightens all people still comes to you and to me and to this hurting world, and that idealized village is wherever we receive the light and take on the good work of making the villages where we live not just an idea of all that is good, but a reality. Starry nights are God's love shining in the darkness, this night and always. A very blessed Christmas to you all. Amen.