When Linda and I lived in New Jersey, we were only about a half hour’s drive from the regional Presbyterian Camp, called Camp Johnsonburg. I’ve mentioned it to you a few times in different contexts. Johnsonburg had lots of programming for children, youth, and adults… it had nice facilities, with an outdoor chapel and a waterfront for boating and swimming. +++ So, we found ourselves there fairly often in lots of different contexts:: Summer camp for the kids, retreats, presbytery meetings – that kind of thing… It’s one of those places that feels like an oasis in the middle of a chaotic world, and over time I became very familiar with the whole property. +++ Well, a decade or so ago, I was at Johnsonburg for a two-day training retreat for youth leaders. The first night we had a team-building exercise (or something) in the dining hall that lasted until well after dark. When it ended, it looked like people were going to hang around and socialize for a while – but I decided I was ready to head back down to my cabin for the night, where 4 or 5 of us were staying. So, I was the first one to leave the dining hall. +++ As soon as I got outside, I noticed that it was an unusually dark night – there was no moon and a heavy cloud-cover. I didn’t have a flashlight, but that didn’t really matter to me – I didn’t hesitate to start walking back to my cabin in the dark – I mean, how hard could it BE? I knew this area like the back of my hand (or so I thought)… All I had to do was stay on the gravel road – it would lead me right to the cabin. +++ After I turned the first corner, all light from the dining hall was gone – and we hadn’t left any lights on in the cabin. +++ You know that kind of dark you get in a cave or something – where you can’t see your own hand in front of your face?? Well – that’s the kind of dark I found myself in. … And the crazy thing was – I still wasn’t a bit worried about finding my way… “Just follow the road. No problem”… After a bit more walking, though, I started thinking I should have gotten to the cabin by now… +++ And that’s when I ran into a tree… Not hard… I didn’t break my nose or anything… But it was definitely enough – finally – to make me stop walking and investigate my surroundings. The first thing I noticed was my feet were on sticks and roots instead of gravel… Next, I reached out my arms to see what was around me:: trees – trees – in every direction… I had been so confident… trusting myself to walk in darkness through this holy place. So confident that it took running into a tree make me stop – and realize – “I’m lost” – somewhere in the thick darkness of the woods – and now,… after being so sure of myself,… I don’t even know which way to turn. +++ So – without any other good options –… I just stood there… and waited. Finally, someone else left the dining hall – and they were driving a car. That meant they were leaving the camp – which meant they’d have to drive right past my cabin! I watched as they turned the same corner that had plunged me into darkness – and then… the headlights lit up the whole area. My light had come! – I could see I was even deeper in the woods than I thought… But, I could also see the road… I could see the cabin! As the car was still there with me, I walked as far as I could in its light. Then… as it passed by… I took one last good look at the cabin – I saw what obstacles still lay before me – I looked at the steps – the porch – the door. +++ +++ Then the car was gone – I was once again standing in a pitch black world… +++ - - but NOW it was as though the light was inside me… I had all I needed. I knew where to go and how to get there… I walked straight to the cabin, up the steps, and through the door. +++ And, the first thing I did – of course – was turn on the lights, especially the exterior flood lights – so everyone else who needed to find the cabin on that dark night could find their way (without getting lost in the woods).

Today is Epiphany Sunday. What does that really mean? We mostly think of Epiphany as the day we commemorate the Wise Men coming to see Jesus and give him gifts… And, yes, that’s definitely part of it… But why is that important enough to have its own day of the year? +++ The word “epiphany” comes from the Ancient Greek word… epi-PHAN-eia or theo-PHAN-eia, which means the “manifestation” or the “appearance” of God; and, it is connected to the word for “dawn” or “sunrise.” +++ So “Epiphany” is God’s actual presence coming into the world with light! … Jesus Christ – the Light of the World – appears… AMONG us when we need him most in a dark and chaotic world… a world where we’ve lost our way and don’t know which way to turn. … He comes to lead us out of darkness, and into salvation! +++ And how does God reveal the arrival of Christ to the world?… With light – as his star rises above the world and leads the Wise Men from the East to Jerusalem… – and then on to Bethlehem… – and finally it stops over the house where the child was. When the Wise Men “saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” +++ +++ Now, this is important:: in Matthew, these people… traveling from the East… were the FIRST ONES to recognize who Jesus really is and pay him homage. +++ These
GENTILES… people who lived outside of God’s covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David… people who were not of Israel… who did not follow Old Testament Law… whom would never have been considered among God’s Chosen People…+++ That is+++ Until NOW… Until Jesus… Now, suddenly, the entire world is called to Christ – and shown the way to him by the light of God, shining from the star. +++ That is what Paul proclaims in today’s Letter to the Ephesians: “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

But there’s more going on in Epiphany than bringing the light of God to the Gentiles through Christ – inviting the outside world into the Family of God… Christ will also shine a light for Israel – for God’s People – for those who have wandered off the path into the darkness of the woods. – He will bring the light to them again. +++ But, the reception the Wise Men receive in Jerusalem shows just how lost in the woods Israel had really become… I mean, I can understand King Herod’s reaction – he’s Jewish, but he’s a worldly king propped up by the Romans. Anyone making a legitimate claim as the Messiah would be a real threat to his power… But, did you notice? It’s not just Herod that reacts poorly to news “the child has been born king of the Jews.” Matthew tells us in verse 3:: “When making a legitimate claim as the Messiah would be a real threat to his power… But, did you notice? It’s not just Herod that reacts poorly to news “the child has been born king of the Jews.” Matthew tells us in verse 3:: “When

Jerusalem… The home of God’s Temple – where good Jews made pilgrimages at Passover – where David and Solomon had ruled… A holy place – an oasis in the middle of a chaotic world… I think there’s a danger, when you’re in a place like that, where you feel so comfortable – a danger that you might decide you can strike out on your own without the light of God… to trust yourself – your ability to find your way in the dark – your own wisdom – your strength. That’s what Herod did… – finding power by cozying up to the darkness of Rome – while the Gentile Wise Men simply sought out the light of God, and found the child. +++ Herod and all Jerusalem trusted themselves to find their way through the darkness + finally+++ they ran into their own trees… and many, but not all, of them stopped – to realize – “I’m lost… in this darkness.” I need a light.

+++ And, for them, Isaiah wrote – “Arise… +++ Shine;… for your light has come…, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;… but the Lord will arise upon you, … and his glory will appear over you. +++ Nations shall come to your light, +++ and kings to the brightness of your dawn… They shall bring… GOLD… and FRANKINCENSE… and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” ++++++ But… +++ the Light of the Messiah is not just for those people, at that moment. +++ The Light of Christ shines for ALL people who walk in darkness – it shines for YOU. +++ That’s the Epiphany of the Lord! :: God’s actual presence coming into the world in Jesus Christ – whose light will shine into our darkness forever!

+++ And, there is so much darkness in our world today – bloody conflicts that drag on for years, terrorism striking fear in children, economies that punish and shame the poor rather than lift them up, refugees fleeing violence only to find persecution, rising oceans that threaten cities and villages around the world… +++ And we… each… wander in our own darkness – depression and other mental illnesses, addiction, financial breakdown, painful family relationships, disease,… sin. +++ Where is your darkness? On what paths do find yourself walking alone – with your hands outstretched because you cannot see and you’ve lost your way? What cabins were you hoping for – but gave up on long ago? What trees have you walked into – that finally make you stop – and realize – “I’m LOST… trying to make my way in this darkness by myself… +++ I need the Light of Christ.” ++

“ARISE, … SHINE…; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” +++ Follow the star of the child – the star of your savior – to peace – to reconciliation – to salvation… When the darkness is deep and you don’t know which way to turn to escape, feel his light inside you – and he will show you the way. Then,… follow his call to find the switches – to turn on the floodlights – and help others find their way home as well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.