

Until this morning it's been a time of year when it's dark in the morning and dark in the evening. I mean really dark. After the time change last night, in just a few weeks we're going to be even more aware of how dark it is. On these very dark early mornings I have become aware of where the light is coming from. Sometimes it's the offensive, blinding headlights from an oncoming car. Last week it was the amazing glow from a huge, bright full moon that made me wonder when I woke up in the middle of the night if we had left on a light in the living room.

My favorite mornings are the ones when there is no marine layer when the light I can see comes from the stars in a cloudless black sky. I like to think that God has hung those stars with great care, and that each one of them is a saint whose life-light is shining on my dark path.

Some of those saint-stars are people from the Bible. Zacchaeus is one of those people for me. Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus was the weaseley little tax-collector who climbed up into a tree so he could see Jesus as he was passing by. Zacchaeus' life was radically transformed when Jesus called him down from the tree and went to have lunch at his house. I can relate to the story of Zacchaeus, and the light of his life brightens my path.

Others of the saint-stars are famous people, but they're not people from Bible stories. Mother Theresa falls into that category for me, and she did even more so after I learned of her struggles with doubt and a shaken faith. Mother Theresa worked in the midst of unimaginable squalor and poverty and disease, and she believed that there was no such thing as a wasted act of kindness. She's been gone for a long time now, but the way she lived her life still shines light on a darkened world. But most of my saint-stars are bright with the light of the lives of people you have never heard of.

I'll give you an example. One of my ordinary saint-stars is Zaphney Ortho Humphries.

Zaphney Ortho Humphries was from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I met him in 1959 when he and my father were both stationed at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, as liaison officers with The Tactical Air Command. Zaphney Ortho Humphries' friends called him Z.O. I called him Colonel Humphries. Colonel Humphries was a Marine's Marine. He smoked a cigar when we were bass fishing at Cheatham Annex or Lake Chickahominy. He said the cigar smoke made the fish bite and kept the mosquitos away. All of the kids in the neighborhood thought he was Superman, because he could walk around the block on his hands.

But what I remember most about Colonel Humphries is what he taught me about trying my hardest and doing the right thing.

One afternoon while he was playing squash, Colonel Humphries collapsed on the court. He was taken to the base infirmary and then transferred to Portsmouth Naval Hospital. I was too young to go, but each evening my parents drove to Portsmouth to visit. I don't remember how many days later it was, but I will never forget the night they came home and my dad gathered all of us together to tell us that Colonel Humphries had died. They had been best friends, and it was the first time I saw my father cry.

Zaphney Ortho Humphries lived for only a short time, but while he was alive his light burned brightly, and it is still shining on my path today.

So the sky is filled with saint-stars, and by the grace of God, today a new star is going to be hung in that sky. This morning Stewart Jordan Preuss will be baptized. Our privilege and our responsibility as members of the household of faith will be to help Stewart light a fire today that will never go out. Our task is to make sure he can feel the embrace of God's love, and to help him understand what it means to respond every single day to God's claim on his life. That's serious business. If we are going to enjoy the privilege and live up to the responsibility we will need to assess how brightly our own light is shining.

In just a few minutes we will renew our own baptismal vows. How are we doing? When we meet someone on the dark road of life, are we generating any light? Is there anything coming from us that is helping to brighten the way?

This morning as we continue to consider the stewardship of our lives, and to express our gratitude to God for all of the blessings we enjoy, we are being invited to offer a sign of our commitment to the mission of this parish church. And if we have heard and responded to this year's theme, "Grateful Hearts Making All Things New," our pledge cards will become sacramental, outward and visible signs of God's inward and spiritual grace. And all of us, whether we have made a pledge or not, will be invited to present ourselves in this sacred space, our souls and bodies, as an intentional, observable testimony to our relationship with the God of love.

During Communion this morning I invite you to look at the list of Saint James saints printed in your bulletin who have died during the past year, and to think about the saints in your own life. They have been the lights of the world in their generations. They are the saint-stars who brighten our path. Today, by the grace of God, we will hang a new saint-star in the sky, and we will have the opportunity to ask ourselves how we are burning.

May our renewed and sincere commitment be to burn brightly, very brightly. The world is a dark, dark place, but there is no darkness that can overcome the light of Christ burning in each of us.

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November 1, 2015
St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church
La Jolla, California