Easter Eve  The year is 240. The people gather outside the small church. The "New Fire" is kindled—a blazing bonfire that sets the children squealing. A beautiful, tall, homemade candle is lit from it, and all who follow the candle bearer into the church respond "Thanks be to God!" to her chant "Light of Christ!"

Christmas Eve  The year is 2004. Just before we sing "Joy to the World" comes the moment so many have come for. A sea of people, young and old, light their candles in the silence, bathing this familiar space in an unmistakable wash of mystery. Then we sing: "Silent Night, Holy Night."

Some things never change  The symbolism of light is primal, archetypal, universal. But notice also how light is typically associated with goodness, and darkness with evil. And the colour white is often associated with the positive and the pure, while black is associated with negativity and sin. Other meanings cluster as well: light as knowledge, darkness as ignorance; light for safety, darkness is to be feared. In a world in which white racism is an historic and contemporary reality, the implications of such colour symbolism in language cannot be easily dismissed. It is naïve to underestimate the power of such associations and their potential damage to the lives of individuals and communities.

Some things always change  It is no coincidence that revolutions also result in a reform of language. "Black is beautiful!" is a vivid example of the critique advanced by the civil rights movement of the 60s. Around the same time, worship leaders began referring to God as "You," rather than "Thee" and "Thou" to express a more contemporary, less distant relationship with God. Also during the latter part of the 20th century, feminist theologians have helped us see the implications of the sexism inherent in much of our church-related language. Today, we are becoming increasingly aware of issues of race in religious language.

Where does this leave us?  Does this mean we can no longer light candles, or sing of the "Light of Christ"? In my view, no. But it does mean we are called to ever-increasing levels of awareness and dialogue, reflection and action, just as we have been in the past. Some suggestions:

Expansive language  Ruth Duck increasingly speaks not so much of "inclusive" language as "expansive" language—that is, language that strives for the broadest possible range of biblical imagery and metaphor. Such language is more biblical, not less. This can be a helpful strategy for light/darkness language as well. While darkness can be fearful, it is not exclusively so. While light can be comforting, it can also cause pain. Seek to expand your liturgical language by expanding your biblical vocabulary. Consult other biblical translations. Note, for example, the Inclusive-Language Lectionary's rendering of John 1:8: "The light shines in the deepest night, and the night has not overcome it."

Joyful is the dark!  Read Brian Wren's hymn "Joyful Is the Dark" (VU 284) (and Paul Sales' article on this hymn on page 70) for insight into some of the biblical symbolism of positive darkness: the darkness of mystery and creation; the shadows of the stable floor; the darkness of womb and tomb, life and new life. Preach on
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these symbols as well. Avoid exclusive and simplistic positive/light negative/darkness associations. Strive, at least, for balance—at most, for counterpoint and reflective critique.

**Emancipatory language** Margorie Procter-Smith distinguishes among "non-sexist" (gender Free), "inclusive" (gender neutral), and "emancipatory" (liberative, pluralistic) language. This is a good goal for colour symbolism. Emancipatory symbolism and language will look for ways of naming the experience of those typically left out of our use of symbolism, the ways in which "black is beautiful" and "darkness is holy." Bear witness, listen, preach, and pray about these experiences as well.

**Pray for Epiphany** The word "epiphany" means revelation, manifestation, or unveiling. In Advent, Christmas, and through the Sundays after Epiphany, the symbolism of light is particularly prominent in our worship. As always, our prayer is that our worship will also manifest the ways in which God continues to be at work in our lives and our world. And God's ways are typically surprising. Prepare to be surprised!

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