

GLOWING PILLARS

The sky was just one shade of maroon below pitch black. And as the car careened around a bend, you could feel it cutting through the thick moisture the way a Rubbermaid spatula does through a chunky can of Crisco.

The telephone lines chased us alongside like hungry cheetahs. And then there they were, a sparse forest of bright columns that looked as if they supported the low hung heavens all by themselves.

Crafted from tiny bulbs above garage doors and pole barns, these country night-lights grew into giants across the sky. It wasn't that some were and others weren't, every light that shown in that special darkness acted like a beacon, jumping from one water molecule up to the next. There was something unique about the thick cloud cover that night, which actually amplified each of those little orbs.

In the birth story of Jesus in the Bible, his daddy Joseph knocked from one door to another in his hometown of Bethlehem, with his wife Mary nearly bursting at the seams, only to be kindly rejected and see his anxiety metastasize into desperation. But then he looked across the way at a makeshift barn, fitting for animals but not so much for people, with a star overhead that would let the whole world know the true light had just come into the world.

Being a good Christian, i.e. showing kindness, living generously, having integrity, praying, occasionally forgiving, going to church and so on and so forth, is what Jesus calls us to do. But that's not all. There's another dimension to our faith that often goes unseen until someone comes to you in their a uniquely cloudy situation.

Recently I found myself in an engaging conversation with a new friend over dinner in downtown Orlando, because we became those people at the table who were too far removed from the center of discussion. So we made one for ourselves. And of course, as so often happens when people learn that you're a pastor, we talked about religion. And she shared with me that she considers herself 'spiritual' but not 'religious'. And I couldn't help but feel somewhere deep under the surface but close enough to hear the echo, she was recalling a Joseph-esque experience, where she too had been shut out of the warmth and safety of God's love.

When we learn how to follow Jesus, sometimes we fall prey to overemphasizing 'step up' opportunities. Like studying scripture, praying, service. All vitally significant for our relationship with Christ. But Jesus constantly presents us with another set of opportunities to grow closer to him. Because more often than not when people talk about being spiritual and not religious, they're courageously sharing the hard truth, that sometimes we disciples block people from knowing Jesus. Sometimes there's just as much wisdom in stepping aside in faith, as there is in stepping forward, for Christ.

So as you devote yourself to Jesus this month, I invite you to ask him a revealing question, "Jesus, where am I a bridge and where am I a barricade for others who need you?" Allow yourself to listen and be sensitive to his response. Because maybe, just maybe, the answer to what your soul needs most is linked to the needs of another.