My vacation last fall took me to the Shetland Islands, set in the middle of the North Sea, halfway between Scotland and Norway. At the latitude of sixty degrees north, they are close enough to the Arctic Circle that they have nearly 24 hours of daylight in the summer and almost 20 hours of darkness in the winter. It's not surprising that the biggest fire festival in Europe is held there on the last Tuesday in January. Up Helly Aa is a late-Victorian celebration, but it reaches back to the island's Viking heritage for its inspiration. It lights up a long, dark winter with fire, music, food, and drink.

Light in the darkness is one of the primary metaphors for belief, for love, for God. We know all too well how easy it is to get caught up in our problems. And many of those problems are heavy indeed: serious illness, the death of loved ones, financial troubles, the state of our world. But if we dwell only in this terrible darkness, we will be utterly consumed by it.

In our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah proclaims: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”

Jesus calls the first Galilean fishermen to leave their boats and nets and follow him. We've become so familiar with the idea that the first apostles were fishermen that we might miss the reality. It's easy to romanticize the life of a first-century fisherman. Most of us think of fishing as a leisure activity, fly-fishing for trout or sitting in a boat on a lake waiting for the fish to bite and napping if they don't.

People who fish for a living, whether in the first or the twenty-first century, know that it's a difficult and dangerous business. Before nylon nets, fishing needed to be done at night so the fish couldn't see the nets. Sudden storms could easily overtake boats and their crews in the darkness. Daylight hours were spent cleaning and drying the fish, hauling the catch to market and mending torn nets. It was hard, physical work, and many people had few occupational choices. They fished because their fathers and grandfathers fished before them.

We might think that our lives are worlds removed from the time of Jesus. But work is work. And no matter what we do or how many choices we have in what we do to earn our daily bread, the day-to-day experience is going to have ups and downs, periods of great satisfaction and dry spells of boredom and frustration. I suspect it was the same for those first-century fishermen. We think of them as being dedicated to their work, their nets, their father and coworkers. But maybe at the time Jesus came along the beach, they were having a bad day and were eager for a change. Only later did they discover for what they had traded in their nets to embrace. It may have seemed like a lark at first, but by the time Jesus was crucified, they knew that their new life had its share of darkness as well.

At different times in our lives, we might think the disciples were crazy to leave behind financial security. At other times, we think they’d be crazy not to follow the Lord’s call. Then it dawns on us that the Lord calls us in much the same manner. One thing is certain in all of this: God chooses to call us. It’s our choice to hear and to follow.
Francis’s “Canticle of the Creatures” praises the sun, the moon, the ancient elements of water, air, fire and earth, the plants and the animals created by God, a vision of human harmony and a belief in death redeemed by Christ’s resurrection.

Francis rooted his lyrical praises in sometimes surprising experiences of his own life and his own senses. It has far more depth than one might expect from what seems on the surface a poem praising nature.

For example, he was going blind when he composed the canticle. His praise of fire emerged not from an evening campfire with friends or a cook fire in the village but from the fire-heated instruments that would be used to perform a cauterization surgery. The stanza about brothers caring for one another and forgiving one another was sung to persuade warring factions to set aside their differences. His praise of Sister Death came in the last hours of his earthly life as he reconciled himself to the next steps on his journey.

Like many children, I was afraid of the dark as a little one. When my own tots had problems along this line, I thought I knew just how to help. Taking a page from one of my big brothers’ book of tricks, I turned the lights on and off repeatedly, explaining, “See? There’s nothing there in the dark that’s not there in the light.” That worked for most of them, but my youngest shot back with, “That’s not true. In the dark, the dark is there.”

Despite our long tenure on this half-dark planet, we humans are drawn to the light. It seems to make things more certain. We feel more confident that we know what’s what. Bad things may still come, but at least we’ll see them coming.

We all realize, though, that much of our lives is spent in darkness—if not literally, then at least the darkness of uncertainty, self-doubt, and fear. Jesus doesn’t promise to make the dark go away, but he does promise to be our light in the darkness. With his presence, we truly have nothing to fear.

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom should I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom should I be afraid?

—Psalm 27

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WEEKDAY READINGS

| Monday    | 2 Sm 5:1-7, 10/Mk 3:22-30 |
| Wednesday | 2 Sm 7:4-17/Mk 4:1-20    |
| Tuesday   | 2 Sm 6:12b-15, 17-19/Mk 3:31-35 Thomas Aquinas |
| Thursday  | 2 Sm 7:18-19, 24-29/Mk 4:21-25 |
| Friday    | 2 Sm 11:1-4a, 5-10a, 13-17/Mk 4:26-34 |
| Saturday  | 2 Sm 12:1-7a, 10-17/Mk 4:35-41 |