Confession time for the priest—again: For weeks now, my daughter and I have been watching “The Walking Dead,” sometimes for hours at a time. This is another practice I am specifically not recommending to anyone else. It’s gross. It’s a television adaptation of a graphic novel series. Not highbrow
 . . . at all.

Yet . . . certain themes keep presenting themselves to me. There’s a lot of fear, a lot of darkness. Shortages of supplies—and not just toilet paper. Many questions of trust and alliances, and who’s on whose side. It’s pretty hard not to see some parallels in contemporary life, at least in that calendar year that’s just ended.

Maybe I’m just trying to justify my almost-secret pleasure, but I think I can see some pretty definite parallels in the event we celebrate today, the Epiphany, from which our little parish takes its name.

Not the dark stuff I’ve described, of course, in and of themselves, but that undeniable background of chaos, jealousies, rivalries, and political scheming.

Here is Herod, always looking over his shoulder for fear of notice and concern by the emperor. He checks out the story of the wise men looking for a Messiah. He eventually calls them into his office, saying that he also wants to pay homage to this newborn who is to become king of the Jews. It’s that old story of enlisting one’s enemies as unwitting undercover agents.

And it looks like it’s going to work. But we must remember: they’re wise men, and it occurs to them in the end not to go back to Herod with a report of the Messiah’s whereabouts. They even take a different road home from Bethlehem. Pretty smart!

It’s a story of innocence, manipulation, intrigue, hardship and ultimate victory. They’ve been called wizards, magi, and kings, these wise men in Matthew’s gospel. It’s almost as if they are the leading men (trying not to say “stars” here, because of the obvious pun) of the story.

As in most wonderful stories, something happens to them in the midst of it all. Something that changes them and changes their plans.

And, as it turns out, something that changes the world for ever.

The good news of this nativity or incarnation cycle culminates in the brief season of Epiphany which begins with today’s story of a star guiding these men through darkness of every kind to the brilliant birth of God into our world. The epiphany, what is revealed by their journey and what they find at its end is that this is not something, someone, only for the Jews in that time and place, but for all people everywhere, throughout all time.

The wise men are stand-ins for all of us. They symbolize the transformative presence of God’s love for everyone.

Herod could do nothing to stop the intrusion of God’s love into the world. Nor has anyone else been able to do that, despite difficult times that have challenged our human capacity to see God in our midst. That baby was born in a far-flung place, whether the wise men had seen him or not. God’s love is always present, whether we can discern it or not. We are the inheritors of both the wise men, making our own discovery of God’s love, and of Jesus, who is that love incarnate.

The prophet Isaiah said it hundreds of years earlier: “Arise, shine . . . Lift up your eyes and look around.” And he revealed to the wise men and to us our mission, our God-given response: “Then you shall see and be radiant.” That’s our calling: to be radiant with God’s love. May we allow God to guide us in becoming that light more and more.

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