Let me tell you a story about light versus darkness....A long time ago, in a manger far, far away. I have always wanted to start a homily that way. Has everyone here seen Star Wars yet? Do you want me to tell you how it ends? Just kidding: this is a spoiler free homily! It does boggle the mind, however, how a story like Star Wars can generate so much interest. It is a story about light versus darkness, isn’t it? I think the trilogy is captivating because there is light and darkness in all of us. Who we are is determined by which side we choose to act upon. And we all have our favorite Star Wars character. Mine is Obi Won Kenobi from the original movies. He is my favorite, not necessarily because of the character in the movies, but because of the actor who played him, Sir Alec Guinness.

A lot of people don’t know this about Alec Guinness but he was a convert to Catholicism at the age of 42. A little background, Alec Guinness was born in poverty. He never knew his father. He converted to Anglicanism when he was 16, but didn’t know much about the faith at that time. He was a seeker though, and tried his hand at a number of faiths such as Buddhism, the Quakers, and perhaps the most controversially of all, Presbyterianism (Just a joke, Just kidding). He was drawn back to Anglicanism while he was rehearsing for Shakespeare’s play Hamlet. An Anglican priest noticed that he was blessing himself wrong, decided to befriend him, and helped him to get it right. The horrors of World War II moved his heart to become more faithful as a Christian. There is something about the darkness in the world that motivates the heart to seek the light of Christ. At that time in his life, Anglicanism was what he knew.

When Guinness turned 40 however, something happened that moved his heart to Catholicism. He was working on a film entitled Father Brown, which is of course based on G.K. Chesterton’s famous stories about a crime-solving priest. He was walking down a street in his costume for the movie and a child mistook him as a real life priest, and this touched his heart. Alec Guinness explained, “Continuing my walk, I reflected [how] a Church...could inspire such confidence in a child...I began to shake off my long-taught, long absorbed prejudices.”

What happened next: his son Matthew came down with Polio and became very sick. During this time, Guinness felt moved to regularly stop by a local Catholic Church to pray for his son. In his prayers, he told God that if Matthew was healed that he would become a Catholic. Well, I suspect you all know what happened next. His son recovered against all odds. Therefore, Guinness and his wife started to send their son to a Jesuit school. All three of them converted to Catholicism a couple years later. Alec Guinness was a faithful and devoted Catholic for the rest of his life. I share this story about Alec Guinness because, although he is known worldwide as the actor who originally
played the famous Jedi Master Obi Won Kenobi, he fought the battle of light versus darkness in his own life and in the same way we do, with prayer and simple acts of kindness.

It is no mistake that we celebrate Christmas this time of year, the darkest time of year, when each and every day that follows must have a little more daylight. During the season of Advent we lit a candle each week as the nights became darker and darker. Today we celebrate the birthday of Jesus. It is a celebration of light triumphing over darkness.

[4 and 6:30] Isaiah proclaims in our first reading, “For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her victory like a burning torch.” In our Gospel reading, meanwhile, the Christmas story almost begins in tragedy by Joseph intending to divorce Mary quietly due to a pregnancy people would not know what to make of. An Angel of the Lord shined light into that dark moment by saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

[Midnight] Isaiah proclaims in our first reading, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone...For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests.” Our Gospel from Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary arrived Bethlehem for the census, however there was no room for them at the inn. So, Mary gave birth to Jesus in a shelter made for animals. Luke tells us, “…there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.’” Angels then lit up the sky to celebrate the birth of our savior.

[Mass during the day] Our Gospel from John proclaims, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Like Isaiah prophesied in the first reading, “Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.”
[All Masses] My friends, what are we to make of this playful dichotomy of light versus darkness in our scripture readings this time of year? I think it is true to say, there is light and darkness in all of us. We all know that who we are is determined by which side we choose to act upon. For Alec Guinness, his answer to poverty, the darkness of World War II and the tragedy of his son’s illness was the light of faith.

We all have darkness to contend with this time of year, whether it is worries about our job, concerns regarding our family, the grief that comes from losing a loved one, or the spiritual darkness that comes from doubt. As a priest, I have to be careful with who I wish “Merry Christmas” to for the only reason that I know that there are many who will not be merry this year, and for just reason. When there is an empty chair at the dinner table, or if you are in a hospital bed, being merry is a tall order. This is why, even though I might have wished everyone a “Merry Christmas” in the bulletin, more and more I am leaning towards wishing everyone a blessed Christmas instead. Why?

You see, I believe that, no matter what life is throwing at us at present, each and every one of us can have a truly blessed Christmas if we realize that celebrating Christmas makes no sense at all without our Easter hope. If Jesus was not triumphant over the darkness of death on Easter morning, there would be no reason to celebrate Christmas at all.

We are here because of our Easter hope, our conviction that Jesus is Emmanuel, a word that means, “God is with us”. We are here because of our Easter hope, our conviction that God has answered our prayers in the person of Jesus, a name that literally means “God saves”. It is our Easter hope that compels us to gather tonight to celebrate the birthday of our Lord. My friends, God has given us a precious gift today, the gift of hope. We are invited to allow this gift, the light of Christ, into whatever darkness exists in our lives.

If we do this, whether we are merry or not this year, our Christmas will be truly blessed because we have allowed the light of Christ to triumph over the darkness. Tonight we celebrate the birthday of hope, who although was born a long time ago, he is never too far away. Indeed, Jesus is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Oh come let us adore him, oh come let us adore him, oh come let us adore him, and may your Christmas be truly blessed through Christ our Lord. Amen.