Don't let the title fool you. While the secular calendar has many thinking about Valentine's Day, and the liturgical calendar is feeling the gravitational pull of Ash Wednesday, there is a very important lesson that arose during this crazy COVID-19 Christmas just past. This lesson is something that can assist both the steward leader and the individual steward in seeing the critical importance of their individual and corporate stewardship faithfulness.

To consider this lesson, one needs to reflect on early November. The clocks had just changed. The light of summer that had been fading all fall was now being swallowed by the darkness of the impending winter. In the areas of the nation where people still “fall back,” the time change only made things worse. The worker and the student were now leaving home in darkness in the morning and coming back home in the same darkness.

But it was not just the darkness of time that was growing. Layers of unsettling darkness were gobbling up the minds and emotions of people everywhere. The uncertainly and unrest that accompanied the recent election cycle added to the darkness. Worse, it seemed that the lingering specter of COVID was darkening as the anticipated surge was driving up numbers, filling hospital rooms and funeral plots. This was a darkness of the soul as well as a darkness of the world. Everyone was on edge. Where to turn was the question being posed, but there seemed to be no answer from science, politics or media.

Pushing back the darkness
Just when it seemed that the darkness had reached its deepest, something remarkable happened. In neighborhood after neighborhood, it started one house at a time. While there is no empirical data to support this assertion, anecdotally, it happened earlier than usual. Perhaps it was the growing depth of the layers of darkness that spurred it on. A solid answer will never be determined. But one thing is true: There was a definite impact! What caused such impact on the darkness? Christmas lights!

Yes, the stewardship lesson from a COVID Christmas can be gleaned from Christmas lights. Those little strings of bulbs wound around Christmas trees, outlining windows, dangling from eaves and draped over shrubs are the objects that teach this stewardship lesson. They make their appearance every year. They mark the launch of the anticipation of the impending season’s arrival. But this year was different. It wasn’t different because everyone switched to LED bulbs (although that didn’t hurt!). It was different because of the depth of the darkness that had descended on our neighborhoods, communities and world.
The lesson is clear. Wherever light and darkness do battle, the light always wins! It is true of a 100,000-candlepower spotlight. But it is also true of a candle in a birthday cake in a darkened room. As first one house on a given block lit up, others started to follow. It became contagious. Houses that had decorated in years past added to their displays. In some cases, homes that had never been decorated joined in. Little by little, the darkness was pushed back. And in the process, spirits started to lift. These individual displays banded together to illustrate to the world that the darkness, while real, could be held at bay!

On the small scale, the grand scale and every other scale in between, this truth bears out. The foolproof antidote to darkness is light. But then again, that shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, the Light no darkness can overcome!

Turning the stewardship lights on

But what does this have to do with stewardship? Plenty! Congregational stewardship is really the corporate practice of the stewards that make up the body of Christ in the local congregation. In congregations where there is not a unanimous commitment to faithful stewardship, there is a growing darkness. Fears of failure spread like the growing darkness does in the fall of the year. Bills mount. Ministry suffers. Anxiety rises. Tension is palpable. Soon brothers and sisters unified in the blood of Christ shed at Calvary start tearing into one another about “the other people” not doing their “fair share.” Failed individual stewards bring on the darkness of failed congregational stewardship.

But when the light comes on, the darkness falls back. As individual members embrace their hope-filled identity as baptized and redeemed stewards of all that God has entrusted to them for His glory and the blessing and benefit of neighbor, the light comes on. This can only happen when steward leaders, pastoral and lay alike, take courage to teach what stewardship really is. It isn’t about paying the bills. It isn’t about the cost of doing ministry. It is about individual Christians seeing their role as bearers of the Light of the Gospel, using the things God has entrusted to them in the process!

No program or process will instantly start “turning the lights on” in a congregation’s stewardship. This comes only from the Word of God. But when the Word of God about stewardship is taught in its truth and purity, amazing things happen. Perhaps it is just one person at first who starts adorning their Christian life with the light of faithful stewardship. But as that “light” is noted and noticed, it becomes contagious! Others will follow suit. The more Christian steward neighbors start practicing this stewardship lesson from a COVID Christmas, the brighter the community will become for the sake of the Gospel.

Steward leaders, encourage those entrusted to your care to decorate their Christian life with the light of faithful stewardship! As you do this, you will see that the darkness will turn tail and run! It will take time. It might take multiple Christmas-like experiences to teach this thoroughly, but the effort is worth it. As the steward light shines, amazing things start to happen at the Lord’s leading!