

Christmas Eve 2010

One of my favorite things at Christmas has always been looking at the lights. I remember as a child the excitement of taking the commuter train into St. Louis to see the department store Christmas displays and the lights. We always rode in the observation car and I remember sitting rapt and gazing at the multi-colored lights flowing past the train. Later in life, as Dennis introduced me to his Nordic traditions, I transferred my love of lights to that moment when the living-room lamps are turned off and everything is bathed in the flickering, golden glow of real candles on the tree. And now, serving at Christ Church, I can add the luminaria tradition to that list.

What is it about lights at Christmas?

We celebrate the symbol of light as we light our Advent wreath.

We come together on Christmas Eve to light our candles.

We sing songs about the light that surrounded the angels the night Jesus was born.

We talk about the light of the star that guided the wise ones to the manger.

Is it just that we live in the Northern Hemisphere

and that Christmas retains some of its old roots

in the Solstice rituals that hailed the rebirth of the light in the darkest time of the year?

Or is it something more?

After all, Isaiah and Luke were living somewhere completely different

when *they* wrote about the light, coming into the world, banishing the darkness.

As I was preparing this, just out of curiosity,

I looked up the meaning of light in the dictionary. I know, typical clergy nerd.

There were about 35 different definitions but the first one said,

“the essential condition of vision, the opposite of darkness.”

How apt, how true this is.

We all need light because it is our way of seeing through the darkness.

Not in the literal sense that a person without sight cannot see,

but in the sense that all of us experience darkness in life

that at times threatens to overcome us.

What can save us from *that* kind of darkness,

the kind of darkness that is or will be a part of each of our lives?

Look at our world this Christmas.

If you watch the news or read the paper,

it certainly seems there is more darkness than light in our world.

And just in case you don't think darkness affects us here in Minnesota,

all you have to do is look around you.

Do you have any idea how many

hungry and homeless kids there are in Goodhue County tonight?

I'll give you a clue: Hope Coalition alone provides transitional housing

for over 450 families and individuals a year.

More than perhaps you realize.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

How many lonely and broken families are there around us?
How many families experiencing darkness this holiday season
because loved ones are lost or will be lost
because they are fighting a war in a far-a-way place?
My gut tells me there are people here tonight, perhaps many of you,
who know about darkness, because it has touched your life.
Darkness...because the diagnosis was not good...
darkness because the way is not clear...
darkness because a relationship or a career has ended.
There is no question that most of us know something
about darkness this Christmas Eve.

And celebrating Christmas does not make the darkness go away.
Don't believe that familiar Christmas song that says,
"From now on our troubles will be miles away."
It just doesn't work that way!
Nevertheless, despite the encroaching darkness,
there is hope, there is love, there is light, that makes a way in the darkness.

So let's talk about light for a moment.

In the Prologue to the Gospel of John,
that great Christmas poem which we will read in full tomorrow morning,
the evangelist calls Jesus the Light of the world.
To be more specific, he says,
"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."
Tonight that is what we celebrate:
Jesus Christ as the light that can push back the darkness in our lives
and in this world this Christmas and every day.

See, here's what Christmas is really about:
To battle a world filled with darkness
and lives that have been riddled by suffering and separation from God,
God devised a very simple plan with massive results.
God sent Jesus - the Christ - the Light of the world - into our lives to be our Light.
He is the essential condition of our true vision,
that we might know love and hope and peace and joy as realities,
even though we live in a very dark world, a land of deep darkness indeed.

So the difference between walking in darkness
and walking in light throughout our lives is all about
the Incarnation, God made flesh; about Emmanuel, God with us.

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Sometimes we tend to wrap up the love story of God and humanity with warm music and mist as if it were a romantic film. Something like the movie and music of Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* or a Lifetime Channel Christmas special.

But the Incarnation has nothing to do with Romanticism and everything to do with a Love so deep, so encompassing, so *real* that it passes human comprehension and changes the meaning of being human.

Our culture and the media that manufacture it tell our children that Christmas is a *magical* time and they present all kinds of magical-moment-images to construct the magical view of buying-and-getting that has come to define our cultural Christmases.

But the Incarnation has nothing to do with magic. Instead, it has everything to do with the Mystery of how God comes into human life to demonstrate a Love so deep, so encompassing, so *real* that it passes human comprehension, and to show what can happen when the power of that love is put to use for God's purpose.

The dailyness of our lives can seduce us into fantasizing about the Incarnation. We can put all kinds of personal hopes, dreams, wants, and needs into this story.

But the Incarnation has nothing to do with wishful *fantasy* and everything to do with *Truth*, the truth about reality: the truth about life, the truth about God, the truth about power – real truth, real world, real power.

Even though the story of the Incarnation involves such wonderful elements as angels, and a young girl, and an over-shadowing Spirit, and courage, and beautiful poetry, and the birth of a child, it is the story of the real God coming into very real human life. The reality of God is now found in the reality of human life.

Love, not romanticism.
Mystery, not magic.
Truth, not fantasy.
Light, even in darkness.

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So - what is it that's creating darkness in your life tonight?
Is it a lack of peace?
A fear of what's going to happen to this world?
A fear of the future?
A fear of failure?
Dear friends, fear is only the absence of peace.
And peace can be found this Christmas.

What is creating darkness for your life tonight?
Is it a lack of hope?
Are finances crushing you?
Family pressure that won't end?
Illness that won't get better?
All these things can dim your hope and hope is a huge light-giver in our lives;
when it is gone, the light seems so very dim.
Hope is in high demand this Christmas. But it is available.

What is it that is creating darkness in your life?
Is it absence of love?
Don't feel loved?
Can't love yourself?
Can't love others?
Something inside you malfunctions when it comes to love?
We all know a lack of love creates darkness.

Love is so desperately needed in our lives,
and fully available from only one source - God is love.
That's how the first letter of John defines God,
in a very straightforward, simple definition –
freely given, unconditional love now in flesh appearing,
that we may see our human condition as originally intended.

Christ - the Light of the world...
Christ - the Prince of Peace...
Christ - the definition of our love...
Christ - the One who illuminates our souls...
Christ - the essential condition of vision...
Christ - the opposite of darkness.

I don't know what may be creating darkness for you this Christmas
(everyone's story is different).
I don't know what crushes your hope -
or threatens your peace -
or robs you of love in your life.
I don't know what specifically causes darkness for you.
But I know how to help you find the Light.

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