

Christmas Eve Meditation

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This is one of the most special occasions on the church calendar: Christmas Eve, a celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. There is a special glow about this celebration, and I'm not just referring to the candles. Christmas Eve is one of those occasions when the scripture lessons don't change, when we can count on the familiarity of the verses, when we retell the story and it never gets old. The observation of Christmas Eve is filled with warmth and love and good news. Yet every year when I sit down to prepare the sermon for Christmas Eve, I feel inadequate to the task. How can I possibly come up with words that capture the magnitude of the glory and the power and the love and the salvation which tonight's scripture lessons convey?

Reinhold Niebuhr, a great German-American theologian of the 20th century, didn't like Christmas sermons either. On Christmas Eve, he and his wife intentionally looked for a church where the service didn't include a sermon. The reason, Niebuhr explained, is that the preacher is not up to the task. The topic is too big. Better for us to leave it to the poets and the musicians, who have a way of expressing and celebrating truth in a way that preaching simply cannot.¹

And so it is that I come before you this evening, fearing that my words will not adequately convey the glory and love and comfort that God shares with us at Christmas. Because if all we leave with this evening is a sweet sentimentality from the music, or being touched by the story of a baby being born and placed in a feeding trough as his first bed, then we will have missed the point. If all we do tonight is historicize or romanticize what happened long ago, then the meaning of Christmas will have been lost on us. For the truth is, as the apostle Paul says to Titus, the birth of the baby Jesus is about the grace of God appearing for the salvation of all people.² And so the purpose of coming tonight is not just to feel good, but to experience something of the love of God and to let God's love begin to transform us.

In addition to the gospel story of the birth of Jesus which we just read, there were two Christmas lessons that we did not read tonight. The first is that familiar passage from the 9th chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet declares, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.'" The second passage that is commonly read at Christmas was actually included in tonight's call to worship; it comes from the prelude to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."³

The common thread is the motif of light and darkness. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... Even the birth of Jesus takes place in the dark of night, yet the glory of the Lord invades the darkness, and later on the wise men follow a bright star...

It is into a dark world that the light shines.

People in general do not like to be in the darkness. Sure, we prefer it to be dark when we're sleeping. But when we're awake, we want it to be light. We need the light to see where we are and what we're doing. If it were always dark, we'd be bumping into things all the time, or we'd be tripping over things. Darkness confuses us.

Sometimes darkness scares us. In the movies, the most scary moments usually take place in a dark room or on a dark street. Thieves and criminals often do their work at night, because the darkness hides their evil deeds.

Darkness is confusing, and darkness is scary.

And you and I both know that darkness is not limited to the physical realm, but also extends into the spiritual realm. For even when we are in broad daylight, we may experience the darkness of our world. Even with the bright lights and the cheerful music, Christmas is a difficult season for those who have lost loved ones; especially the first Christmas, when the carols are more apt to bring tears than joy, when the empty chair at the table is a reminder of one who is no longer there.

People walk in darkness.

So too, for those who are struggling with life-threatening diseases; the haunting question that neither they nor their loved ones want to ask is, "Is this their last Christmas?"

People walk in darkness.

So too, for those overwhelmed with worry about plant closings and job insecurity and rising prices; for them, Christmas is a painful reminder of gifts they are not able to provide for their loved ones.

People walk in darkness.

So too, for those whose loneliness is only compounded during this season when so many families come together; Christmas is a reminder of broken and failed relationships.

People walk in darkness.

But at Christmas we remember that it is into a world of darkness that a light shines. Christmas is God's declaration that to people walking in darkness comes a great light; those who dwell in deep darkness, on them a light shines; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome the light. Christmas is God's declaration that he has entered into our world and the light of God's love and mercy dispels the darkness that surrounds us.

The amazing claim of Christmas is that, in the birth of a little baby boy in the middle of the night in an overcrowded, overbooked village near Jerusalem, God "lighted a candle in the midst of the darkness of human history. And although the darkness still is sometimes very deep, as surely it is for young Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, as it is for many people coping with loneliness, discouragement, personal loss and grief--although the darkness is sometimes very deep, it has not overcome, nor will it ever overcome, the light."⁴

The darkness has never overcome, nor will it ever overcome, the light, because in Jesus Christ God has loved us with an everlasting love. It is a love that is so great, and it is a love that is unconditional. There is nowhere we can go, no darkness so dark, that the light of God's love will not shine.

In just a few moments, we will make this place dark. The only lights will be the lights of the candles on the advent wreath and along the windows. And from the large white Christ candle we will, one by one,

light one another's candles, until every candle is lit. You will notice that as each candle is lit, a little bit more of the darkness is dispelled.

As it is with the candles, so let it be with the light of God's love in you and in me: let God's light shine into the darkness of your life, and then take God's light and shine it for others.

Because when the light shines in the darkness, the darkness is not able to overcome it.

And the angel said to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."⁵

Indeed, the people walking in darkness have seen a great light... And the darkness cannot overcome the light.

Not ever.

Glory to God in the highest! Amen.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr's comment is taken from a sermon by John Buchanan, 12/24/1999, www.fourthchurch.org

² See Titus 2:11

³ See Isaiah 9:2, 6; John 1:1-5

⁴ John Buchanan, Christmas Eve 2004, www.fourthchurch.org

⁵ Luke 2:10-11