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Christmas Eve Sermon 2020
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Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken to the people of Israel, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” The winter solstice arrived in the Northern Hemisphere on Monday night, and as we greet this new season, we remember that the paradox of winter is that at the moment we experience the longest night and the greatest darkness, the light begins to grow again.

Darkness and light are often woven together. The devastating day that our nation surpassed 300,000 deaths from COVID was also the hopeful day that we began to vaccinate health care workers and the most vulnerable. If you are a stargazer, you understand this paradox of light and darkness. Only on the clearest, coldest, and therefore darkest nights of winter are the stars in the sky the most brilliant. Only deep darkness makes it possible for human eyes to find the light of those stars millions of miles away.

Elizabeth Dias wrote a story for the New York Times earlier this week entitled, “How We Survive the Darkness,” reminding us that this season, despite the dark and cold, offers ancient lessons of anticipation and renewal. Throughout history, humans have responded to this season with stories of hope and deeper truths. There’s the Hanukkah story of the miraculous one-day supply of oil keeping the candles of the menorah lit for 8 days. And the celebration of Diwali, in which Hindus light clay lamps to symbolize the inner light that protects them from spiritual darkness. Or Yalda, which means rebirth of the sun, observed by Persians on the night of the solstice, to celebrate the triumph of light over darkness.

Nobody actually knows what time of year the infant Jesus was born. But it’s no wonder that around the 4th century, Christians began to celebrate his birth during the time of the winter solstice—and the celebration of Christmas came to be—*our* story of expectation and a deeper truth—*our* answer to the darkness of the world. The story of hope we have prepared for through the weeks of Advent when we heard these words, “Come, O come Emmanuel, turn our darkness into light. Come, O come, O prince of peace, send a ray of hope tonight.” (Advent Candle Shine, Jean Anne Shafferman)

And that’s why we’re here this Christmas Eve. [Either in the churchyard or watching from home.] We need to hear the story—the story that gives us meaning and helps us wrestle with the darkness—the story of a savior born to bring peace and love and light.

For most of my life, I have been at church on Christmas Eve. And to be honest, I can’t tell you that I remember a single sermon from those many church services—I barely remember the ones I have preached myself over the past couple of years. But I do remember how I felt when Luke’s Gospel was read. Just hearing the words, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered,”

takes me back to memories of warm churches filled with candlelight and poinsettias. I remember the tears welling up as the lights dimmed and the candlelight was spread while we sang “Silent Night.” And I remember leaving the church to the celebratory refrain of “Joy to the World” or “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” and entering the dark and cold night and looking toward the stars for a sign of Santa’s sleigh.

There is such power and emotion that goes with this night. And this year while different...is actually not that different. We still tell the Christmas story to bring light to dark days. To help us make our way in that space where we exist—between “the what has been” and “the not yet”—the birth of Jesus and the final realization of God’s peace on earth.

Our fondest memories of Christmas Eve are of story and song, poetry and ritual. The familiar words of Luke’s Gospel and the lyrics of our beloved Christmas carols—that’s what brings God’s embodied promise to life for us. “O come all ye faithful.” “Come let us adore him.” “This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.” “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” “Let every heart prepare him room.”

But who is this savior, born in Bethlehem and placed in a manger, for whom we prepare room in our hearts? Our Christmas story—our story of light overcoming darkness—is as important for what it isn’t as for what it is. God didn’t come to us on Christmas as a superpower or a superhero. God came to dwell among us as a newborn baby, humble and vulnerable. Born not to royalty and wealthy parents but to poor Mary and Joseph finding their way—desperately looking for a place to safely deliver the baby Jesus and protect him—likely still wondering what all of it will mean.

And who shows up first to welcome and honor the baby? Not the Wise Men bearing expensive gifts, arriving from the East after a stop at the Palace in Jerusalem, but the humble sheep herders of the fields. Shepherds that remind us of the past—King David, called from the fields to lead God’s people, and shepherds that point us to the future—Jesus the shepherd king who will leave the flock to find even just the one who is missing.

And so tonight, like Mary, let us treasure the words of these lowly shepherds who came praising Jesus after the song and sign of the angelic hosts. And let us ponder in our hearts the news that this babe in the manger was sent to bring peace to the earth. Let us hold fast to the story of Jesus’ birth and the incarnation—God made human to bring light to the world. And let the spark of that light live within us and be nurtured by us so that it might grow and shine for others. And may the words of John burn in our hearts this Christmas season, “The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will never overcome it.” Amen.

