



Love's Light

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Feast of the Nativity~December 24, 2017*

Isaiah 9:2-7

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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Psalm 96:1-9

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| 1 | O sing unto the Lord a new song;
sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth. | | but it is the Lord that made the heavens. |
| 2 | Sing unto the Lord, and praise his Name;
be telling of his salvation from day to day. | 6 | Glory and worship are before him;
power and honour are in his sanctuary. |
| 3 | Declare his honour unto the heathen,
and his wonders unto all peoples. | 7 | Ascribe unto the Lord, O ye kindreds of the peoples,
ascribe unto the Lord worship and power. |
| 4 | For the Lord is great, and cannot worthily be praised;
he is more to be feared than all gods. | 8 | Ascribe unto the Lord the honour due unto his Name;
bring presents, and come in to his courts. |
| 5 | As for all the gods of the heathen, they are but idols; | 9 | O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth stand in awe of him. |

Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,

praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

There are a few different theories as to why Christians celebrate Christmas on Dec. 25. But whichever theory you buy—that it actually was about the time Jesus would have been born or that early Christians co-opted pagan winter festivals—there is something right in our celebration of Christ's birth in this season of short days and long, dark nights. Some years it feels to me that the celebration of Christ's birth is all about the light, and some years it feels very much about the dark. This is one of those years. In many ways, and for many of us, life feels particularly dark right now and light is hard to see. Things that we took for granted, principles about how we treat each other—basic respect for the dignity of other human beings, how we live together in the common bonds of society, seem to be under threat. We are more divided as a nation than perhaps at any time since the Civil War. The poor and the vulnerable seem to be getting trampled underfoot. In my daily life as a parish priest I talk to many people who feel afraid, hurt, worried, even hopeless. The Christmas poem or song that seems to fit best this year is Longfellow's "Christmas Bells" with its line "And in despair I bowed my head;" "There is no peace on earth," I said; "For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!" Things just seem bleak and it can be hard to see just exactly where God is amidst all the fear, confusion, and noise.

2000 years or so ago, when Jesus was actually born, the world also seemed pretty bleak. His parents were residents of an occupied land, forced to travel a long distance to register with the Empire—to make sure they knew who was in control of their lives. When they got to Bethlehem, despite the fact that it was Joseph's hometown, no family greeted them or took them in. So they were forced to find shelter in a cave (yes, I know, our translation says stable, but in 1st century Palestine most animals were kept in caves so "stables" were "caves"). And it was there, in the darkness of a cave, surrounded by animals and dirty straw, that Mary gave birth—without the comfort of her mother or sister or a midwife there to help—alone, except for her likely befuddled husband and the cows and sheep keeping warm in the cave with them. Despite all the paintings and carols that depict a rosy and serene scene, I have to believe the holy family was tired, afraid, and bewildered. And if you look at the sweep of human history this sense of bewilderment and fear is a recurring theme.

From the beginning there have been long stretches of darkness—times when things seemed pretty bleak. And yet, as we read in Scripture, as we see if we look carefully, all along, quietly, often in the dark, God has been working. We sort of expect, sort of hope, that God does big, splashy, light-up-the-sky things. And it is true, from time to time God does exactly that. But mostly, as Mike Kinman says, God is a night owl and seems to do God's best work in the dark, quietly—in unexpected ways and through unlikely people.

Think about it—in the very beginning, when there was nothing but darkness, God spoke and separated the dark from the light, creating day out of night, and then from that primordial darkness called into being every blessed thing. And God fell wildly and completely head over heels in love with all of it, all of us. Some of God's creation stayed right by the holy side, hanging out in God's dazzling light, happy to dwell with the source of all life. But some of us, humans as a species, well, we got itchy, and wandered off—seemingly preferring to stumble around in the dark; banging our shins against one sharp object or another, cursing whatever we crashed into, cursing the darkness. And God could have stood and waved as we receded into the shadows, turning to a sloth or some other creature that had remained faithful and saying, "well, that whole human thing didn't work out as expected", but that is not what love does, that is not what God does. So God kept calling out to us. God called to Abraham in the darkness of night in a dream and assured him that, while there would be difficult times, God would be with him and that he and his 90 year old wife would be the founder of a whole nation. Out of the darkness and hopelessness of slavery in a foreign land God called to Moses who led the people to safety in a land of promise. God came and wrestled with Jacob in the middle of the night and gave him a new name and with it a new future. When Israel was on the brink of destruction at the hands of a foreign power, God spoke through the darkness to Isaiah and promised that while things would get worse first, "light would break forth like dawn". Time and again, no matter how bleak the world felt, no matter how much we chose darkness over light, God kept calling us, reminding us we were not alone, shining enough light for our footsteps. Until finally, after having tried just about everything up the Holy sleeve, finally in the still darkness, where all new life starts, God became human—and came to dwell with us. Not just with us, but one of us. Flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone. Fully human and fully divine. And, despite what you might expect given how unruly humans have been, God did not show up as one of us to punish us, to yell at us, to condemn us for the way we have treated one another, the way we have treated all creation. God showed up and loved us—loved us to death.

I am not entirely sure why God would do this- except for that whole “loves us wildly and almost irrationally” thing. And I surely don't know how. But what I do know with every fiber of my being is that because God did this, because God joined us in our humanity, everything has changed. Because God did this, we know that God loves flesh, that life is holy, that matter matters. We know that there is nothing God will not do to win us back. We know that God loves us, each of us, all of us, no matter how important or lovable we might or might not be. And to make sure we got that crucial point, God showed up in and to people the world was pretty sure were not important, or loved: social outcast shepherds, an unwed teenage Mom, astrologers practicing a whole different religion. Every last one of them playing a crucial role in God's most earth shaking, quietest, act.

And isn't that just God's way? Working quietly through the very ordinary, the very human? While we are looking for something large, bright, and shiny, God slips into the world in the middle of the night, in the darkness of a cave, in a 7 or so lb bundle of flesh, surrounded by animals and two tired, confused, human beings. Because a darkness as deep as the world's could only be illuminated by such perfect, pure love and vulnerability. And as big a miracle, as amazing as that act 2000 years ago was, the continuing miracle is that God still slips quietly into life. Light still breaks in among the darkness because that holy birth did not just happen then, it continues to happen. The Christ Child is born again and again and again. Incarnation was not a one-time offer. It is God's constant offering, and it is how God keeps slipping into the world, driving away the darkness. Tonight is a victory for the light that darkness could not and cannot overcome; a victory for the unlikely and the improbable.

Yes, it is night. But it is a holy night-filled with the light of a star and the song of a promise fulfilled, a promise renewed. Look. Listen. Hear the angels sing, hear a baby cry. Reach out your arms and pick him up, cradle him, then let his light shine through you to illuminate the world.