

Christmas Eve: Come Home

John 1:3-5

December 23-24, 2020

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I don't remember every Christmas that I've experienced. There are some that stand out – the childhood Christmases when I received that gift that I wanted but didn't expect – or the year I sang the solo in our Sunday School Christmas pageant – or the Christmas before Amanda and I were married and she was living in San Antonio, Texas and I joined her there and we walked the River Walk on Christmas Eve. Then there's the Christmases when our children were old enough to experience the wonder of the lights on a tree and spent an entire morning playing with the wrapping paper without realizing the gift was actually inside the package. Or the Christmas I surprised Amanda with a gift that she had hoped for but never expected. This night is a night filled with memories that I cherish and want to hang on to and relive in my mind.

But not every Christmas has been like that. There have been Christmases filled with tears and disappointments. Christmases when I was far from home or a child didn't come home. The first Christmas without a parent or a grandparent. Christmases where the gap between expectations and reality were huge, leaving us with an emptiness – vowing not to get our hopes up ever again. Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, and it is the hardest time of the year. And this one, this Christmas is one we will never forget. Maybe you've been able to salvage certain traditions and find ways to bring a certain amount of joy into this night. But for a whole lot of people, this is not the Christmas they were hoping for.

The reality of this night is that there is darkness and it's real, and if it's not now, every one of us will find ourselves in a place of darkness - powerless, alone, and needing help. Every one of us. A few days ago, I met with a woman to help her plan the memorial service her partner of 14 years. He died at 47 leaving behind two daughters. In recent days, I've spoken to persons who have lost jobs and don't know how to make their next mortgage or rent payment. Last Friday, I helped deliver two truckloads of food to a neighborhood in Minneapolis where people were lined up an hour and half before distribution because they had no other way to feed their family. I've spoken to people who are living in isolation afraid that they might never experience another Christmas with family. And then there are the people who have lost family members and friends to the coronavirus. This is real life for people who live among us.

It's hard to sing Silent Night when you're hungry or afraid of what the next week will bring. It's hard to sing Joy to the World when you are all alone tonight, wondering if you will live long enough to hug your children and grandchildren again. Or this might be your first Christmas without someone. How do you sing Joy to the World on a night like tonight? Or it could be mental illness – anxiety, depression or maybe you're alienated from someone, thinking 2021 will be year of your divorce. There are thousands of ways darkness enters our lives and every one of you will experience darkness. It's part of life.

If you are walking in darkness tonight, Christmas may seem like a cruel hoax. How does the story of a baby born two thousand years ago change anything? Angels sang, shepherd came, wisemen gave and that changes what? Christmas is not about a promise that everything will be okay – “Don't worry, be happy” if you just believe. But that's not the story of Christmas. Christmas is God's response to the darkness in our world. God is saying, I have sent Light into your darkness and that Light is Emmanuel (God with us) – and that Light will never leave you no matter how dark it gets. When we are walking in darkness, that's when we need Christmas the most.

On the night Jesus was born, it wasn't that everything suddenly became safe or peaceful. The Roman Empire continued its iron grip on the tiny nation of Israel. Roman installed Herod as king – and Herod was desperate to hold on to power. He terrorized the nation. When he felt threatened by his wife – that she was somehow usurping his power, he killed her. When he felt threatened by his oldest son, he killed him. And then he killed his next oldest son. The only life Herod valued was his own, and he would stop at nothing to retain power. This was darkness – and when the wisemen arrived in Jerusalem to inquire about a baby born King of the Jews, Herod ordered all babies in Bethlehem be killed. This was the darkness into which Jesus was born. And yet, that night there was something that had never been. God came to earth, to live and die as one of us and to teach us about a different way – a way to live without the fear of death, pain, or shame. Later, John, one of Jesus' followers would write: **In him was life and that life was the light of all people. That light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.** This is what the birth of Jesus means. There is no longer any disease, any economic crisis, any lockdown or quarantine, any brokenness or challenge or distress that can take away the promise of light present. Darkness will not have the final word.

Recently, I saw another Christmas ad on the Internet. Take a look: [video]. After watching that ad a few times, I saw the metaphor. God is like the older man, waiting for his children to come home. We are busy. We have our own lives to contend with, our own struggle, our own darkness. But what God is waiting to provide is the light, the joy, the banquet that has been prepared for us. The Bible tells us what ultimately awaits each of us is a banquet surrounded by the people who have loved us throughout our lives. The question is: "Will we choose the Light?"

A few years ago, our children were not coming home for Thanksgiving, so Amanda and I decided to spend Thanksgiving weekend in San Francisco. We stayed in a hotel a few blocks from Union Square which is a plaza in the middle of the shopping district and across the street from Macy's department store. In the center of Union Square, there was a large Christmas tree sponsored by Macy's with 20,000 lights to be turned on during a tree lighting ceremony on Friday evening after Thanksgiving. It was a beautiful evening and we were nearby, so we went. Thousands of people began filling Union Square. We stood next to a man who came to the tree lighting every year. He put his camera on a tripod in a spot that he had determined was the best location to photograph the tree at the exact moment the lights came on. He looked forward to this moment every year – and clearly thousands of others did the same. At exactly 6:45, the crowd joined in a countdown 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1. And 20,000 lights began twinkling. It brought an impressive glow to Union Square. There were ahs and the flash of cameras. And within 30 seconds, the man next to us had his things packed up and left. That was it. It was over. But then I noticed the crowd moving toward Macy's department store. They weren't going inside but were crowding around the windows around the outside. Each window featured kittens and puppies to be adopted from an animal shelter. And at each window there was someone standing with a large jar to collect donations for the shelter. And if you didn't know, maybe you would begin to realize there's something more to this season than the glitter and the twinkling of lights. After looking at the kittens in the window, we began walking back to our hotel and as we turned the corner to our hotel. There on the sidewalk – a man pulled a thin, filthy blanket up over his head as he laid down on the sidewalk next to a building – his bed for the night. And at that moment, I realized – that's why we need Christmas.

The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. The light came into the world, so what will we do

with that light – and John would tell us – reflect that light. Be the light that this world so desperately needs. That’s why tonight we will be giving away our entire Christmas offering. If you choose to give, half will go to provide child care for children whose parents cannot afford it and in the process the children will receive love and a fair start in this world. The other half will go to teenaged women in Kenya – some as young as 11 year old, victimized and pregnant in a culture that has no room for a teenaged mother and her child. Eight years ago, this church sent a missionary to Kenya to open Imara House and provide light to the young women who had only known darkness. Tonight, you can do something to bring light into the darkness.

In the 1990s, there was an ad on radio and television that advertised a hotel chain and its tagline was “We’ll keep the light on for you.” But long before that ad, we always turn on the light in front of our house whenever we are waiting for someone to come home. It’s our way of saying, we are waiting for you – and the light is an indication that what you can expect is love and acceptance and people who have never and will never give up on you. 2000 years ago, in a tiny manger inside a dark cave with two frightened teenagers, God turned on a light for you – and is waiting for you to come home.

So, tonight I have a decision to make, and it takes courage to choose the light when everything around us seems dark. *In him was life and that life was the light of all people and that light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.* My invitation is simply this: take a candle and receive the light.

Prayer:

God, we give you thanks for life and love and the people who fill our lives with meaning. Most of all we thank you for Jesus and how in him you offer light. I pray for everyone who is listening right now. Fill each one with your light and help us to take your light into the world. Amen.