

From the Community Pulpit

December 24, 2004

Christmas Eve

“Candles of Grace ”

Texts: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:1-14; John 1:1-14

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Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 – 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.... 6 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, Prince of Peace." 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-14 – 1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. 2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. 7 And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; 11 for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from the midst of the stones of fire. 17 Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor....

John 1:1-14 – 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God; 3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. 9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. 11 He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

Introduction

Good evening! And, once more, Merry Christmas! Tonight, all around the world, Christians are gathering like we are here –

- ✓ in a strong solidarity
- ✓ in simple sympathy
- ✓ in soaring celebration.

And all of what we do takes place around a simple powerful, gathering

symbol. *Tonight is a night for lights!*

Christians come to this night of lights for a hundred thousand reasons, and even more!

✓ Some of us have been coming to this appointed time on the calendar as long as we can remember. We can't have Christmas without the events of Christmas Eve.

✓ Some of us are here because of a sense of family responsibility, because of connections with our extended families, *especially because* of our extended families. We say, quietly, within the confines of the sanctuary of our hearts, this is what families do, no matter what shape they are, in all of their uniqueness.

✓ Some of us are here on this night of lights, I suspect, because we are fed-up with the commercialization of the season, and we're here to re-discover the real "reason for the season."

✓ Many, if not most of us, are here to bask in the glow of the story, the story of all stories, re-told, re-lived, of how God's love for this earth became real beyond dispute in the form of a baby.

✓ Some of us are here with families and friends that are precious to us beyond description, along with many we don't know and may never see again, because we delight in the unity, exhilaration, and soul-stretching joy that fills us to the brim as we remember how God shines glory on the world, again and again, in the winter of its discontent.

AND, we come to this place, this time, with these people, because this is a night of lights.

The Story of the Light

What else could we do, knowing that the story of the light stretches back forever?! From creation's dawning, to this very cold December 24, 2004, in the middle of Kansas City, Missouri, the story of God's light of love and grace beams its message down through the millenia.

Isaiah foretold it: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."* With eager expectation and more than a few down-heartening setbacks, the people of Israel knew that their deliverance would come from the light-bearer, the one who would be *"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

The gospel writer Luke, in his version of the Christmas birthing, also paints a word-picture of the light.

With your sanctified imaginations, picture what Luke calls the glory of the Lord shining down and around those hapless shepherds. Imagine, for a moment that that brilliant shining was a combination of all the light displays you know of in

the greater Kansas City metropolis. Take ...

✓ the cascading, rainbow waterfall of electric brilliance that shimmers down the face of the Downtown Marriott Hotel,
and add to that...

✓ to the forest of blazing illumination at Crown Center,
and add to that ...

✓ the Plaza lights, with its 14 square blocks covered by 80 miles of lights, consisting of 288,000 bulbs,
and add to that

✓ every Christian congregation observing Advent for the past four weeks, lighting the flames of hope, peace, joy, and love, and then, tonight, the Christ candle in the center of untold incendiary rings of illumination,
and add to that

✓ the millions of luminarias that surround thousands of churches around the world, especially in Mexico, the origin of that special lighting heritage,
and add to that

✓ our own “Steeple of Light” and all of its 1.2 billion candle-power of illumination.

Gather all of those beautiful and breath-taking moments of light, and imagine that that would be one-one-hundredth of one-tenth of a percent of the glory that nearly blinded and stupified the wonder-struck shepherds.

New Meanings This Year

This Story of Light has come into this season’s experiences with new meaning this year.

(1) Someone – I really can’t figure out who – “spammed” my e-mail in-box with a “*Bless This Day*” message, regarding a “*Rapping Baby J.*” At first I thought it was a weird and crass example of what a friend calls the “Californianizing” of our culture. But I listened and watched the glowing , haloed figures on my computer screen with fascination and received another message about the gift of Christmas light.

The “Rapping Baby J” is really quite unique and, to some ears and eyes, I would suspect, hilarious.

First you hear the chorus from the stylized creche scene, with a sun-glassed Joseph and hip-looking Mary, as they sing:

*Christ, Christ, Baby
Christ, Christ, Baby*

Then the little baby Jesus bounds out of the crib and begins singing:

*It's Christmas Day – Pray, pray
I'm Baby J
It's my birthday today!
Come and Pray – Pray, pray
I'm Baby J
It's my birthday today!*

Then the three Wise Men chime in:

*Go Jesus, It's your birthday!
Go Jesus, It's your birthday!*

Then the animals surrounding the manger – a donkey, horse, and two sheep – join in the glad declaration:

*You down with G - O - D?
Yeah, yeah! JC!
You down with G - O - D?
Yeah, yeah! JC!
Who's down with G - O - D?
Every last homie!¹*

The least that we can say is that this is the height of cultural kitsch – the setting of the sacred story of Jesus' birth in the sing-songy rhythms of a rap song. And yet... the message of that lighted e-mail message, as kitschy as it is, as “Californianizing” as it may be to some, somehow reflects the light of imagination and creativity that yearns to shine forth with a new declaration, a new way of telling the old, old story.

(2) Then there's the way the Story of the Light comes to us in more profound

ways, say when any one of us is in the midst of pain during this season.

Say, you're battling a cold, and the cold develops into something the biologists haven't even discovered yet, a mutation of pandemic plague proportions. And the cold lodges somewhere deep in your lungs, until you begin to sound like Darth Vader, on your worst day, or Darth Vader's voice, James Earl Jones announcing CNN News, on your best days.

Then add to that circumstance, a toothache, and then a session with the dentist, straight out of the movie *Marathon Man*, who brings out those three-foot-long needles. Two cavities filled later, with enough novocaine to deaden half of the left side of your body.

Now, put the Darth Vader cold together with the post-dental pain. The coughing stimulated by the cold seers a pain straight to your jaw. Raising up in pain because of the jolt to the jaw, your breathing ceases stimulating another cough, and then... you get the picture. Put both of those experiences together simultaneously, and there comes bolt of lightning pain the likes of which you've never experienced in your coughing, cavity-filled life.

But the message of the Story of Light is declared even then. The message? In moments like those, and really in all moments, we are absolutely dependent on others -- like caring co-workers who sympathize and support, like Dr. Pat, who is no dentist from any movie, but an actual angel of mercy, whose ways with a drill are really divine and saved the day; like receptionist Terry whose soothing reassurance paves the way for final relief.

And in the midst of that pain you discover the One whose name we always cry out when we are convulsed in paroxysms of pain: "O God! O God!" And that is another meaning of the Story of Light. Exactly. In all of life, even in the midst of pain, perhaps especially in the midst of pain, we are dependent on Someone outside ourselves Who helps us and heals us and holds us ever close to a comforting, eternal heart of grace.

Then you realize the ever-more pained places and people around the world, and an "Oh God!" cries out from them with even greater power. The lightning bolt of devastation, delirium, and destruction goes with blinding speed through the famine-weary Sudan, and the hate-weary Middle East, and the war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan. The illumination is everywhere, far more unimaginably painful than any tooth or cough could ever be. And we face the inglorious light of a cry and a truth that are utterly unavoidable: "*Oh God! Oh God!*"

(3) But tonight the arc of the Story of Light reaches its zenith glow in an event more treasurable than any other light. Simply put, this is the time when we light candles. As we come to this time, let us call these candles, tonight and forever,

candles of grace.

This is where the Story of Light becomes really real. This is when we are invited, encouraged, perhaps even compelled to know the story of God's light of grace and love with a deeper understanding than we ever have before.

This is my hope, this is my dream, this is my prayer for each and every one of you: Receive your candle this night as a special message of love for you. Simply receive it, take it in your hands and ponder the sheer, stupendous simplicity of what God is doing in our midst. Think to yourself: ***"This candle represents the love God has for the whole world, including me."*** Know that you are blessed with a life and a love that distinguishes you far more than merely a blob of protoplasm in an uncaring expanse of a meaningless void. Rather, as John's gospel has it, you are aglow with God's *"power to become not children of God, who [are] born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."*

Then, when you light your candle – as you say silently to yourself what we always silently say, "This is the night we light candles!" – when you light your candle, light it as a candle of grace. Light your candle in order to grace the world with a simply, unconquerable beauty and supreme truth: *that all of the squelching darkness of the world has not, does not, or as Eugene Peterson translates it, "cannot" overcome God's light.*

Then would you do one more thing? This is what I sometimes might call "the homework" portion of the message, but it's really intended now as a gift for you and yours. When you leave, take your candle with you as a small reminder of the grace with which you can illumine some one's life. Like ...

A loved one whom you adore and who will cherish your saying, "I love you." Say it to them. You can't say it often enough. Be a special blessing to them this Christmas, and give them the gift that truly keeps on giving: the memory of love expressed with endearment and care.

And then remember that the grace of the Christmas Eve light need not be kept to just one night, indeed cannot be kept to one night. The candles of grace we light on Christmas Eve are sentinel reminders of the lighting of the world that awaits enkindling, wherever we go, wherever we live, whatever we're doing, with whomever we meet. *"This is the night we light candles!"* Yes. And *"This is the life in which I can light a candle each and every day wherever I am, for however long I live."* Yes, to that, too. Yes Indeed.

"This is the night we light candles!" Think it, say it, ponder that phrase with new eyes. *"This is the night we light candles!"* Aglow in that repeated truth, may you all know how much God loves you. May we express such wondrous love to each other. And may you also know this: I love you, dear people of God!

Thanks be to God that this is the night we light candles. Merry Christmas,

and Amen.

NOTES ¹ <http://l.blessthe day.com/redirect.cfm/11590/83717/11368/8594346>

Each Christmas Eve I compose a poem to be shared in Community's Christmas Eve Services. Below is the poem which was shared this year, however, only in the 7 pm Christmas Eve service.

Candles of Grace -- Christmas Eve, 2004

There are times that need no light:
 when a field requires the fallow cover of rest,
 when a wound needs the shielding bandage of care,
 when telling secrets would ruin a holiday,
 not because of a delightful surprise,
 but because of a unavowed, self-inflicted grief.

There are times that are injured by light:
 when stars come out to shout,
 when a day's hardships are put to sleep,
 when an error, yet repented, is still revisited.

There are times that the light of day makes impossible:
 the gleam of moon on the pond,
 the streak of comet across the sky,
 the forgetful healing of our less noble moments.

But there are times, so many times, that must have light
 when the light must come or we may die:
 when the way through the forest is unknown,
 when the rites for the fire are forgotten,
 when the words that anneal have vanished.
 when the story needs remembering.

This night is such a time,
 when unlit flesh must have light,
 when a world, this world, drowning in darkness,
 this earth, this hard-pressed earth,
 starving from lack of illumination,
 must have light.

So: Give yourself a present: Light a candle.
 And thus thereby, enkindle
 a memorable life for yourself
 a living memory of the light of life,
 an infant's story, King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
 and your story, your own birthing,
 born in the cover of a night-like wombing,
 the birth your own heart,
 opening to the world,
 and opening to another, and another,
 and to God, who awaits your quickening heart
 with gladness. And with shining glory.

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