

## Christmas Eve

Thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for taking time out of your busy preparations for Christmas and your family celebrations to come to this beautiful church. Many people have worked many hours to prepare for this night. I am grateful to them for their service, and I am grateful to you who make it all worthwhile.

The beauty and peace in this cathedral tonight is in sharp contrast to what many of us experience in our daily lives. It has been a year of natural and human-caused disasters. There have been shootings and train wrecks. There are personal anxieties as well. Many wonder how the recently passed tax bill will affect them. Perhaps you are here looking for refuge from what worries you. Perhaps you are here reluctantly, wondering what the church can possibly offer in such a world.

Tonight we heard stories of light shining in the darkness, weakness speaking to power, of a birth long ago to a young couple in a small part of the world that always seems to be in conflict. Somehow the birth that we celebrate tonight is supposed to make all of the difference *in* the world. But how can that be? How can that offer hope to us, thousands of miles and years away from what happened then? What does that story tell us about our own stories, today? Where is that message of hope?

It's helpful to remember that the stories we heard also come from a world of violence, of even greater violence than we have in our country today. The prophet Isaiah was writing at a time when his country was in danger of being invaded and all of the people carried off into exile. Into that darkness he proclaimed that light would come. Paradoxically, he said that a *child* would be called Mighty God and the Prince of Peace. What seemed hopeless would be filled with hope.

We also heard from the masterful storyteller, Luke the Evangelist. He, too, gives his story a setting of power. Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the entire known world, commanded that everyone go back home and be registered. A young man obeyed the command and took his fiancée back to his home town of Bethlehem. Maybe it's because she's already pregnant that his family won't let him into their house, but for whatever reason, they have to make do with whatever shelter they can find. And there her baby is born. Meanwhile a group of shepherds, who live out in the open for months at a time while they tend their sheep, have a vision of angels singing. Astounded, the shepherds go into town and find everything about the baby just as it was told them. It's a wonderful story. Somehow, it can all be a bit hard to believe in our twenty-first century.

Many of you know that in addition to being a priest, I'm also a trained scientist. You may expect me to give a rational explanation for all of this. If so, I'm going to disappoint you, because I also have a very deep sense of mystery. I believe that there is more to human existence than what is available to our five senses, the subject of science. I believe that there are more ways of knowing the world than scientifically. One of the ways we express that kind of knowledge is through story. The stories we heard tonight tell us some very important truths about how God works.

For one thing, God always upends our human expectations. God is with those who are without power – perhaps even especially with them. Grace comes to the least important people and in the least expected places, to a young couple who can't find housing and shepherds who live outdoors. God is also most powerful in weakness. Who would ever expect God to appear as a child? No one. That one fact alone should cast doubt on any argument that all of this is made up. Fabricated stories are supposed to be believable, after all.

We also heard that God appears as light in darkness. One of the most common biblical reactions to the presence of God is terror – and God's response is always, "Be not afraid." We heard it tonight. It was said to Mary when she found out she would have a child. Jesus has to say it again and again to his disciples. Do not fear. I am with you. I am with you in the darkness and the terror. Whenever anyone asks me "Where was God" when something awful happens, I always say, "Right in the middle of it, with all of those suffering people. God knows what it's like to suffer at the hands of human beings." The cross is always in the shadow of Jesus' birth.

But the most subtle message we heard tonight is the one we most resist. God seeks nothing less than the transformation of the world. We resist it because the first step is our own transformation, so that we can act as agents of God. God needs *our* help to make the world better.

Now I admit, that's not often what we hear from Christians in the news. If your view of Christian faith is darkened by the strident voices of judgment and condemnation that we hear so frequently, know that Christ himself is light, not darkness. Christ is welcoming, not judging – in fact Jesus said leave the judging to God. Don't do it yourself. God desires the reconciliation of *everyone* to himself and to one another.

Of course, we can choose to walk away from God. We continually fall short of who God calls us to be. Fortunately, God doesn't stop calling. Whether we listen or not, God continues to invite us into the mystery, into the light, into the love of Jesus Christ, revealed to us in the little baby born tonight.

So thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for coming to this place where Jesus appears in mystery, and in love, and in promise. You are welcome in this place, whoever you are, and wherever you are on your own journey. Make the stories you hear tonight part of your own story. Find out how God calls you to reconciliation with himself and with one another. Then go out and be that light that the world's darkness needs. Work with God to help create the world the way it was intended to be.

[Christmas Eve: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.]