

## Christmas Eve

Welcome to Trinity Cathedral. Thank you for being here tonight. Each year I welcome and thank those who come to this beautiful Christmas Eve service, because I am truly grateful that you have chosen to be here rather than somewhere else. You are welcome whether this is your first Christmas here or your ninety-fifth.

Part of the wonder of this Christmas Eve service is that any of us are here at all. I don't mean here on this earth, although throughout history humans have repeatedly made the world less habitable for themselves and other living things. No, what I mean is that it is surprising that we are here in this place expecting something. It's even more astonishing that this expectation was created over two thousand years ago, and here we still gather in hope and wonder.

We're here because we're celebrating Christmas, the birth of the Christ child, Jesus. In the Episcopal Church we won't celebrate the coming of the wise men, the Magi, for another twelve days – they haven't even made it to the windowsills yet, headed toward the crèche in the front of the church. Nevertheless, the time of year and weather remind me of the way T.S. Eliot begins his poem "The Journey of the Magi." He imagines them reminiscing years later:

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.

That's where we are, isn't it? The very dead of winter. This time of year I and a lot of people are very grouchy – or crotchety, as someone recently put it. I have a lot less patience for the driver in front of me who is going twenty miles an hour or the person at the store aisle standing in the way, slowly scanning each shelf. This is the time of year when people get sick, or sicker. The nights get longer and the days are so cloudy that it seems like the sun will never shine again. The winter solstice has passed, but only barely. It will be weeks before the weather warms for good. It is indeed a dark time of year, both in the natural world and the human world.

I think that's part of why we're here tonight. We are looking for light, for hope, for some sort of promise. Humans have yearned for hope in their lives for much longer than two thousand years. The prophet Isaiah talked about hope in darkness so eloquently that George Frederick Handel set his words to music when he composed *Messiah*. The Apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Titus and talked about blessed hope. And long ago some poor shepherds, talking care of their sheep on a cold winter's night in the wilderness of Israel, were scared out of their wits when a message of hope suddenly burst in the sky.

What a strange message that was! They were told that the Messiah, the Lord, had just been born. A young couple who hadn't even made it to getting married before she became pregnant had struggled into town, finding no place to stay except a dirty stable. Her baby was born among the straw of the animals. And this child would be a Savior? I don't blame you if you are skeptical about the whole business. It's a strange way to begin a story about future greatness.

The story got even stranger as it went on. Those wise men came from far away and laid gifts at the baby's feet. The child grew up to be a man who healed the sick, welcomed the outcast, challenged the wealthy and powerful, and finally was put to death. Strangest of all, his tomb was found empty on the third day and people saw him alive again. It all makes for a very peculiar story, and it all began on this night.

Somehow, though, that story made sense to the people who encountered the baby and the man he came to be. They saw hope in him, and they experienced love and acceptance in a way they had never known before. They told their friends, and they told their children, and their children's children. Over generations the word spread until it reached the men and women who built this beautiful cathedral over a hundred and fifty years ago. The Word got to your ancestors, and to your parents, and finally to you, and here you are, whether you want to be here or not.

I really do believe that some part of you is looking for hope, for light in a dark world, and for love that never ends. You are here in this place of transcendent space and beauty because you yearn for something greater. The strangest thing about Christianity is not that a man rose from the dead. The strangest thing is that we believe that God, in all of God's majesty and transcendence and immensity and power was willing to take on human form so that we might know how to be truly human, and find out just how vast God's love is. If that hadn't happened, we wouldn't be here tonight.

So welcome to this place. Thank you being here. Find the hope that you seek. It is here in the words of the Bible and our *Book of Common Prayer*. Hope comes in the bread and wine of communion, where we encounter the Real Presence of Christ. But most of all hope is here in the people around you. That's why many of us keep coming back week after week, year after year. We find Christ in one another, dimly, tentatively, imperfectly, yet convinced that if we look hard enough, Christ will be there. On this night in which Jesus was born on this earth, let the light of Christ be born in your heart. Then take that light, that hope, that love with you, as best as you can hold it, and shine it on a dark world that so desperately needs it. *You* are the light of the world.

God bless you, God love you, and God strengthen you to be the people God knows you to be.

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