

Light in the Darkness
Luke 2:1 – 20; John 1:1 – 18
Monday, December 24, 2018

Since I was little, this service – the Christmas Eve candle light service – has always been my favorite worship service of the year. Going to church at *night* always felt different and exciting. The *music* – singing our favorite Christmas carols. At the church I went to growing up, there was an older man in the choir, and every year he would sing *O Holy Night* with this rich, beautiful baritone voice, and even as a kid I was like, “Wow!” The *feel* of this service – the peaceful calm of the night, taking a break from all the busyness of this season to just *be* here, the awe and wonder and mystery that is *tangible*. As a kid you know that this service means that Christmas is here, and this is the last thing standing in the way of you and presents, so that added to the excitement of this service. And standing in the dark sanctuary with our candles lit, singing *Silent Night*.

But as much as I have always *loved* this service, since I was a child it has also filled me with a certain amount of *fear*. Because every year, as I walked into the sanctuary, they handed me one of these awful little candles with the paper disk around it that was *supposed* to stop the hot candle wax from flowing down onto my hands, but *never did*. I was *terrified* of getting hot wax on my hands. It was probably an irrational fear, and I’ve gotten a lot better about it over the years, like how getting a shot seems to hurt more as a kid than it does as an adult. But rational or not, I absolutely *hated* these candles. Because even as a child I knew that when the lights are out, and everything is still and quiet, and you’re singing *Silent Night* next to your parents, and that hot wax starts to drip down onto your hands, *you cannot make a sound*. You just have to suck it up and *deal with it*.

And believe me, I tried everything imaginable to keep the wax off my hands. I developed this technique where I would fold the paper disk a certain way to use it as a handle. One year I put a *glove* on. And then there was the year – I was around 10 years old – I discovered that if I held my candle at a certain angle, no wax got on my hands! This was a revelation for me. It was life-changing. I was *so happy*, standing there holding my candle, singing *Silent Night* with all my heart! When the lights came back on and we started singing *Joy to the World*, I looked down at the pew in front of me and saw that the *reason* no wax got on my hands was because it had all dripped onto the fur coat of the woman sitting in front of me. I could not get out of there fast enough. The pastor gave the benediction, and I was out the door as he said, “Merry Christmas.”

It’s funny how even the smallest light can have an impact far beyond what we can imagine.

It’s like when we used to get the Christmas lights out to decorate. You would untangle them all, plug them in, and nothing happened. *One little bulb* on this strand of 100 had gone bad, and because of that, the whole strand goes dark. So you had to go through each light on the strand to try to find the one that had gone bad. It was *infuriating!* Or like when you’re trying to go to sleep at night, but this one little light from the clock across the room or the street light out the window is shining *right in your eyes* and keeping you awake. The smallest light can have an impact far beyond what we can imagine.

A couple of weeks ago, Jen and I were down in Florida on a trip for our anniversary. We were in the Keys, an hour away from any major city, just out in the middle of nowhere. And this one night, we were out by the water, and we looked up, and the *whole sky* was just *filled with stars*. I saw shooting stars all over the place. I was looking at this one thing that I couldn’t quite tell what it was – it looked like a star, but it was *fuzzy*. So I pulled out an app on my phone that

shows you what you're looking at in the night sky, and it was a *galaxy*. A whole other galaxy that I could just see with my eyes, no telescope or anything. That tiny light had such a huge impact on me and filled me with such *awe*. We're not *used* to that here because we have so much city light around us. But when you get *away* from the city lights, out in the middle of nowhere, in total darkness, *that* is where you can really see the stars. You don't realize the impact that the light can have until you're in the darkness.

You don't notice that light in your bedroom until it's dark and you're trying to go to sleep. You can't see the Christmas lights until the sun goes down and it's dark. But then when you're *in* the darkness and that light shines forth, it can have an impact far beyond anything we can imagine.

And the funny thing is, it's like we spend our lives avoiding the darkness. We constantly have lights on, whether from lamps or street lights or the TV or phone screens. And it's not just *physical* darkness. We spend our lives trying to avoid *all kinds* of darkness – spiritual, emotional. We try to shield ourselves from any kind of bad news or problems or pain. We do whatever we can to ward off the darkness. But the thing is, it is only *in* the darkness that the light can really shine.

It was in the darkness of the night that an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. But it was *also* in the darkness of his own distress and inner turmoil about whether he should marry Mary; it was in *that* that the angel shines the light of God's presence and says, "Do not be afraid. God is with us."

It was in the darkness of night that angels appeared to shepherds in the field, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. But it was also in the darkness of their own status as social outcasts.

Shepherds were looked down upon to the point that their testimony was not acceptable in court. But it was to *them* that the angels declare good news of great joy, the birth of the Messiah. And they *go* to Bethlehem to see, and when they *find* Mary and Joseph and the baby, they tell them all the things that the angels said. And everyone who heard it was *amazed*, and Mary did not *dismiss* their testimony, she treasured it in her heart.

It was in the darkness of the world that the Word of God became flesh. It was in the sinfulness of a world that did not recognize God that the true light, which enlightens everyone, came shining forth the knowledge and love of God.

And it is into our darkness still, that the light of God shines forth. It is into the darkness of the sin and suffering and chaos around us and within us; the darkness of grief and pain and loss; of guilt and fear; of sickness and sadness; doubt and despair; it is when we are struggling in that darkness that God comes to us and says, “Do not be afraid. I am *with* you.” What we celebrate tonight is that God became one of us in Jesus Christ to live the life that we live and experience the things that we experience, so that when we *do* have to walk through the darkness, we can trust that we do not have to face it alone. That God has not abandoned us. That Christ walks with us through the darkness because he has been through it before and he knows the way.

Christmas is God’s promise that even when we are dwelling in the deepest darkness, the light of God’s presence shines forth still, and nothing will be able to overcome it. Not all of the hatred and violence and chaos and sickness and sadness and death in the world. That no matter how dark it gets, there is always the faintest glimmer of hope and peace and joy and love. Sometimes it may be so faint that we can barely see it. But even the smallest light can have an impact far beyond what we can imagine.

Poet Ann Weems writes,

Into this silent night
As we make our weary way
We know not where;
Just when the night becomes its darkest
And we cannot see our path;
Just then is when the angels rush in,
Their hands full of stars.

God has rushed in to the darkness of this world and our lives bearing light. That is the *promise* of Christmas. The *question* of Christmas is how *we* can bear the light of Christ to others; how, when we see *them* in the midst of darkness, *we* can rush in with *our* hands full of stars. Howard

Thurman writes,

I will light candles this Christmas.
Candles of joy, despite all the sadness.
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present.
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days.
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all my living.
Candles that will burn all the year long.

What candles will you light? What small, simple way will you shine the light of Christ into the darkness around us? You may not think it's much, but even the smallest light can have an impact far beyond what we can imagine. May it be so *this* night and *every* night, in Christ.

Amen.