

Waiting in the Light

Christmas Eve 2014

Where was the light on that first Christmas night? What rays pierced the darkness of Bethlehem when Jesus was born? Surely there was a lantern in the room where Mary laid her baby on the straw of a manger. A low light by which she gave birth and swaddled the child. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, surely the angel lit up the darkness of a desolate field. And when the great company of angels sang “Glory to God in the Highest,” their light must seemed as daylight to the startled keepers of the flock. When the shepherds ran to see the thing the angel had told them, “you will find a child lying in a manger,” they went by the light of the stars to the find the small and crowded room. The magi who came from the East followed a star they had seen at its rising, a heavenly light that led to the king born in Bethlehem. They all had light for that first Christmas night.

But there was no light like the light of the child in the manger. The light of the one *born* that night was a greater light than any that shone in heaven or on earth. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the coming of the Messiah as a light that shines in darkness. On the people who walked in deep darkness, light has shined. This light is the Savior who is coming to put the world to rights; the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He is light coming into the darkness. He coming with justice and with healing and power and with joy! When John speaks of Jesus in the opening of his gospel, he describes him as light coming into the darkness. He writes, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the **light** of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” One small child, an eternal light brighter than any other light that first Christmas night.

When you are in the dark, having even a little light makes all the difference in the world. When Mary was swaddling Jesus, just the light of a lantern was enough. When the shepherds were running to Bethlehem, just the light of the stars was enough. When the magi were traveling east, just the light from the star was enough to show them the way. When you are in the dark, just a little light makes all the difference in the world. About a week ago, we had a new dishwasher delivered to the house. The men who delivered it were going to install it, but for one reason or another they couldn’t do it. So that night, once the kids were tucked into bed, it became my project – to install the dishwasher. Having never done it before, I got out the manual and all the tools it suggested and set to work. Pulling the old one out wasn’t much trouble, and I put the new one in its spot. I was down on the floor connecting one hose to another when suddenly the house went dark. The power was out. I was there with two hoses in my hand thinking, how did that happen? Then I looked out the window at the church, and saw it was dark too. Then up the street, and it was pitch black. What did I do?! It turns out the town lost power that night, fortunately no thanks to me. So Caitlin and I spoke to each other in the dark and said, we need to find a light.

Now, in some homes a flashlight is carefully kept in a certain place. On a shelf, in a cabinet, by a door, it’s reliably there so that when the power goes out you can find it in the dark. In our house, the flashlight is always kept wherever it was laid down last. The last time I used the flashlight, I was in the basement and I knew it was somewhere in the basement – a place that happens to be very dark when the power goes out. So off I went feeling my way along looking for the light. Searching with hands, carefully placing my feet, kicking to find my way forward. And finally I put a hand on it, and switched it on. (You thought I was going to say the battery was dead!) *And it made all the difference.* We got out a

few candles, and I went back to installing the dishwasher with a flashlight. When you're in the dark, having even a little light makes all the difference in the world.

When the Bible speaks of darkness, it is a metaphor that stands for evil, for pain and suffering, for hopelessness, for betrayal, for injustice, or oppression, for corruption, for chaos. It is a metaphor that stands for all that is opposed to God and God's purposes and God's intention for the world and human life. When the people are walking in darkness, they are walking in suffering and pain, in heartache, and brokenness. All of us in some way are walking in darkness, searching for light. Through grief, through disappointment, through betrayal, through loss, through sickness and in long recoveries, we are all in some way searching for light in the darkness. When the news brings us face to face with war, corruption, greed, grinding poverty, anger, tragedy; we search for light in the darkness. When we are working for peace, for the wellbeing of others and our community, for a flourishing life for ourselves and those around us, we are searching for light in the darkness.

What is it like to walk in the darkness? A number of years ago at Austin Theological Seminary, a student was preparing a lesson on the ninth chapter of Isaiah for a Christian Education class. The student wanted to try an experiment and went looking for the darkest place on the campus. She found it in the basement of a building, an old racquetball court partially underground hidden by several doors and hallways. She led the class down the stairs to that small court, had them sit along the wall and turned out the light. It was utterly dark. Some students gasped, and then she said, "You are living in a land of deep darkness." And a hush fell over the students, while they waited, and waited, in the dark. After a few minutes, the student said the words of Isaiah, "on those who lived in a land of deep darkness, light has shined." At that moment, she struck a match and lit a candle. A small candle that cast light across a darkened room. The students saw each other's faces, some were surprised, some were puzzled, some were crying. When you are in the darkness, even a small light can make all the difference in the world.¹ Isn't that why you've come here tonight? Looking for light on this Christmas night?

The living Christ is the light of the world, and the living Christ is here among us! The eternal light born in the stable of Bethlehem, lives today – is here today, here in this place. Christ is light in the darkness that will never go out. Christ is an eternal flame of grace and truth that was lit before the foundation of the world, and burst into time in Bethlehem. The light of Christ is the light of Emmanuel, God with us. When the light of Christ lives within you, and in me; it shines through you as love, and grace, truth, forgiveness, mercy and compassion. When the light of Christ lives within you, it shines through you as justice, and peace. When the light of Christ lives within you, you become a candle in the darkness, the light of God shining through you.

Tonight when we lift our candles, it is a symbol of the light of Christ that lives within us, born in Bethlehem, risen in Jerusalem, a light can never be put out. When we lift our candles it symbolizes the light of Christ that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Some are you are here tonight looking for light; like those students on the racquetball court, like me searching through my basement, the light has gone out in your world and you are looking for just a small light. I invite you tonight to trust Christ to be your light. Trust him in your darkness, and he will find you and bring you his light. For his life is the light of all people, the eternal light of the world. Amen.

¹ <http://day1.org/1022-luminarias>