

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
December 24, 2020

Christmas Eve Homily: Light Shines in the Darkness

In driving around this corner of Western North Carolina, I have noticed many homes with bright Christmas displays as lights line the edges of houses and wrap around trees. I find myself a bit more open to such displays this year for some reason. One property near my house uses a spotlight to make a silhouette shadow of the word “JOY” on the side of a barn with a little Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus inside the letter “O.” I saw another house that had such a winter scene with blown up figures, lights, and snow that I think they could have charged admission, which might be a good idea to help offset their electric bill. There is one home I passed recently that had all of the Christmas characters like Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman, and the Grinch lined up next to a nativity scene in neon lights -- all just ordering options on the menu of Christmas in America.

Have you ever noticed that in some places it is the custom to put out a nativity scene and rather than having a star above the manger, you’ll find a cross there.¹ Have you ever seen that one before? A cross hanging above the manger. I’m not sure if it’s certain churches that have that custom or certain areas where it’s the norm but pay attention and you’ll see this way of telling the story with the cross looming large over the birth of Christ. It’s as if even in Christ being born, even as the infant’s first breaths are drawn, the instrument of his death is on display, a foreshadow of the suffering and loss that is to come.

We too easily forget that in Matthew’s Gospel, it was not long after the birth of the Messiah that those in power began to seek to take his life. King Herod heard rumor of a newborn king -- one about whom prophets spoke and for whom wise men journeyed -- so Herod tried to apply pressure to learn of the infant Christ’s location. Herod’s kingdom, being built on violence and fear, had no room for this Prince of Peace. Matthew’s telling says that Herod was so threatened by this little child that he ordered the destruction of all male children born around the time of Jesus. The church remembers these little ones with a feast day on December 28th of each year, just three days after we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord -- three days after Christmas. It is the Feast of the Holy Innocents -- innocent children who were martyred as a vassal king tried to hold onto his power, not realizing that with the incarnation of God, with the birth of the Christ child, he had already lost. The cosmos was shifting. Love had gotten loose and become enfleshed and could not be contained. It took only a child to reveal cracks in the walls of empires.

¹ This observation originally came from a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock. I have observed the phenomenon, also, of a cross placed atop a creche.

As long as I can remember, I have known that Christmas is a joyous time but also can be a hard time for many of us who become more intimately aware of the loss in our lives at this time of year. Many of us have had to bury loved ones. Partners, spouses, who for a lifetime gathered with us for special meals and exchanging gifts are not here. Or we have loved ones whose bodies are fine -- they're sitting right in front of us -- but their minds left us long ago. Some of us have had to bury children who used to bask in the excitement of Christmastime. Many of us have faced changes this year that have made our lives difficult and frustrating. And this year, all of us are more separated from those whom we love at a time when we should be coming together with the people we love the most. We've all had heartbreak this year and some of us are just trying to learn to live with hearts that are beating but broken as if in a permanent state of disrepair. It's as if the darkness of death and loss are here too, like a cross hanging over the manger at Christmastime.

My friends, the Christmas story actually begins in darkness. It's a thick and cold darkness that had the world in its grip, a strangling darkness that took away our ability to live and to breathe and to love. It's into the middle of this darkness that Christ is born. It's as if God handed the world hope -- hope incarnate -- wrapped in swaddling clothes. Something happened there in the darkness that first Christmas that is characteristic of who God is. God being one who enters into our darkness, takes on our despair, joins with us in our loss and grief, and then gives us hope that there is a way forward, there is a way to love again, that there is light shining on our path to show us that way. God enters into our world at its darkest hour, then and now.

It's revealing that in John's Gospel, this great mystical text, it begins and there is no word about Mary and Joseph. There are no angels heard on high. No talk of the manger or shepherds or Wise Men. It's just a light shining in the darkness. It's a glimmer in the distance which means the light of all people is coming into the world. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5 KJV).

This is a story, first of all, of God joining us in our humanity with all of our struggles, all of our grief, all of our brokenness -- God joining us as we are -- and then offering us a relationship with God's very self in Jesus Christ whose radiance and way of love gives us hope and shows us the way through when we cannot see. It's true that this year we are all more aware of the darkness than before, but it's always been there and that is exactly why the true light came into the world. God refused to leave us wandering in the dark. A light so big, and so bright, and so warm became flesh so we might know the light and love the light and follow him when things get darkest of all.

Isaiah writes, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in the land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined.... For a child has been born for us, a son given

to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

My brothers and sisters, this is Christmas. This is the story of when God embraced the world. This is the story of a child whose light cannot be contained by the walls we build or the chains we carry or the darkness that presses in on us. You can put a cross over the manger, but don't be confused: not even the darkness of death can contain this light.

“Rejoice, friends, because the story we share in this season is one of hope overcoming despair, courage overcoming fear. It's a story of light being kindled in a very dark place and the darkness comprehending it not. The light shines in the darkness.”²

The light shines in the darkness. The light shines. We can rejoice.

² The Rev. Peter Gray, Chaplain of All Saints' Chapel at Sewanee: The University of the South in this video of The 61st Festival of Lessons and Carols, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbNu-IMKKIA>.