

Christmas Eve – 12/24/16

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, O God. You are our rock, our redeemer. Amen.

Well, here we are: another year past, and we're gathering together to remember and celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus. And for as many of us as there are, there are that many different reasons for why we are here.

Some of us come for the music. Either to hear it, or to sing it. Some of us come for the scripture, the story, to be reminded of how the bible tells the story of Christ's birth. Some of us come out of tradition, or out of obligation. Some of us don't want to be alone on this night.

For some of us, this night is one of the few times that we attend church. For others, it's one of many services we attend throughout the year.

Some of us seek the sacred, and some of us hope the sacred seeks us.

But however we got here, for whatever reason we have for being here, the message that is waiting for us is loud and clear: things are going to be ok. And that's a gift.

And the Gift of all that the Christ Child represents far outshines any of the gifts we could possibly buy for each other. In the

history of Christianity, Christmas wasn't celebrated until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And though Jesus was likely born at another time than the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, there were already traditions and faiths that celebrated around the Winter Solstice. Gifts were exchanged to celebrate the lengthening days ahead.

In 17<sup>th</sup> century America, Christmas was just another work day. It was actually made illegal to celebrate Christmas in Boston in the mid 1600's!

European traditions carried to America included wassailing, where rowdy young people begged strong drink and rich food from the townsfolk; if they were refused, then the homeowner was met with some kind of mischief. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that merchants encouraged Christmas celebrations to steer away from wassailing, and toward gift giving. This reduced the amount of mischief done to homeowners, and increased the merchant's revenue from gift purchases...basically a win/win situation!

Today, countless families experience the frazzled worry that their Christmas might not be enough. Not enough presents, not enough food, not enough decorations...

But the gifts that Christ brings, and the gifts we can share with others through his presence with us surpasses any gifts we might be able to purchase.

The message we get from celebrating the birth of Jesus is that things are going to be ok. God promised that it would be so, and as we gather to hear how God's promise was fulfilled on earth

over 2000 years ago, we are reminded that no matter how challenging, no matter how painful, no matter how difficult things may get, in the larger scheme of things between God and the world, things are going to be ok. Maybe even better than ok!

This is true, in part, because the meaning behind the birth of Jesus transcends even the most difficult of our circumstances. This is true because the very elements that we have used during the Advent season to get to this night, Hope, Love, Peace, and Joy all help us transcend the challenges that will most certainly be placed before us.

The presence of the Christ Child, the ministry of Jesus, and the power of his resurrection all point to something much larger than even our own lives. Now, that is not meant to diminish our worries and our concerns. Financial challenges, relationship issues, health concerns, mourning the loss of a loved one, these are real challenges, and they are often painful.

But in remembering the birth of our Savior, we become bound up in the Hope of the moment. We become recipients of the Love of Christ. We become calmed by the Peace of God, and we have reason to express the Joy of our salvation. That's what we do on this night. That's what we do every Christmas Eve: look for ways to connect to the miracle that outshines even the most difficult of our life circumstances.

The gift of the Christ Child is the most perfect gift of all: his presence in the world means we're going to be ok. It's a reassurance that God's promise to us is constantly being fulfilled. It may not always feel like that, especially in the more painful

moments of our lives, but we know that it is. And our presence here tonight means that we hope and pray for a sign that this is true. It means that we want to do our part, in some small way, in participating in God's promise too.

When we leave here tonight to go back to our homes, we will carry with us a gift that will outshine any gift we may receive from someone else: God's gift of Jesus. Freely given, whether we feel we deserve it, or not.

In that gift, in that special gift of Jesus is all the hope, love, peace, and joy we could possibly hold. More than enough light to banish the darkness that tries to encroach upon our lives. More than enough light to illuminate the things that are important to us.

Tonight, we not only get to receive the light, we get to share that light with each other. Not just metaphorically, but literally, during the singing of Silent Night. And that is the message we need to remember throughout the year: we all receive the light, and we need to share the light with others in as many ways as we know how. That's our end of the promise with God. And that's how we know that things are going to be ok, because there's something we can do to reinforce the message of such a gift.

Tonight, we get to remember the miracle, we get to recall the story, we get to sing the carols that evoke the wonder and joyous choruses of gratitude written over the years. But having done so, our task will be to find ways to share that good news with others, those who are in need of some good news.

My fear is that there is way more darkness outside these four walls than there is light. If the world were left to its own devices, the darkness might even win. But we know the truth: that the light that shines in all of us grows when it is shared. A kind word causes someone to be a little more patient. An act of forgiveness encourages someone to be more forgiving. An act of generosity nudges someone to be a little more generous with those around them. An expression of joy encourages others to express their joy too.

This is not a secret. This is simple faith: when we treat others the way we wish to be treated, we share the light. When we live our faith in simple actions, we multiply the light. When we practice our faith with the elements of Advent and Christmas, with Hope, Love, Peace, and Joy, we multiply the light.

That light illuminates all that is good, all that is loving, all that is accepting, all that is nurturing. That light shows us the harmony, the melody, and the rhythm of God's love for us.

And the world needs more light. More hope. More love. More peace. More joy. And the only way it's going to get more light is from you and me. It's the only way. Just you, and me, sharing the light we have received so graciously from God. And if we don't share it, it can't multiply.

We'll all meet back here next year, many of us. And whether we attend all the services between now and then, or whether we don't attend any of them, the only question that will matter is: did we share the light? Did we share the light that we received

tonight? Will the world have more light in it next year than it did this year?

My hope and my prayer is that it will. We all have the tools necessary to make that happen. But do we have the will? Do we have the courage? Can we take the risk?

Now, I know we can't make it Christmas Eve every day of the year, that would be silly. And we'd get tired of it very quickly. But the meaning and message of Christmas, that God came to dwell among us in Jesus, that Jesus is the light of the world, and that we are left to be the ones who share that light, well, that never grows old.

2000 years is a long time to collect stories and examples of the Christmas gift: but this year, let's find a way to make some new stories, to try some new ways to share God's gift to us. We know in our hearts and in our spirits that there is always more light to share, and there is certainly no shortage of people in need of that light.

We'll start by sharing the light here. Christ's light. But it can't stay here. If it does, it will fade. It will only multiply when it is shared with others, beyond these four walls. Shared in the way we treat others, shared in the way we accept others.

Family, friends, neighbors, strangers, even our enemies need the light of the world, the hope, the love, the peace, and the joy that emanates from that miraculous birth. And we're just the people to share it with them. Merry Christmas!