

December 24, 2015

MEDITATIONS ON LIGHT
Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

PRELUDE *Wexford Carol*

LIGHTING OF ADVENT CANDLES

CAROL *Joy to the World*

PRAYER

Thou who art SPIRIT, a Being beyond our comprehension – with power we cannot imagine, with wisdom we cannot fathom, with caring we do not dare to believe – Great Spirit, we remember this night that YOU call the worlds into being; that You give life to all that has life; that You alone know what is happening, what is going on, where it is all leading – and that You know it all throughout all the galaxies, and in however many dimensions there are.

All of this we remember in vague awareness – having ourselves only six or seven senses; and being confined to one tiny spot at a time; and having very limited, finite brains to think with; and having had, thus far, only a few brief moments to use them and to experience the wonder called LIFE.

We are not complaining; we are rejoicing that You have called us also into Life. But somehow – remembering the vastness of Your Creation, of Your Being, of all the far-flung evidence of things continuing so far beyond our tiny sphere of life and awareness – thinking of it makes this night all the more precious and all the more startling: that You come to be with us – in the personal, in the particular, in the now of our own levels of Life and awareness.

To the full extent of that awareness, we thank You now for Christmas, for the Coming – for the invitation. Help us to accept it. In Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray it. Amen.

SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-17**

ANTHEM *Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People*

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Meditation SEEKING THE LIGHT

There is a phrase in the ancient liturgies: “Can we, by searching, find out God?” Hard to tell, after such a question, whether there should be a clap of thunder, or a snicker. How ridiculous – ludicrous – when we stop to think. If this is a game of hide-and-go-seek, that does not leave us with much chance. If we are “it” and God is hiding (which is, of course, exactly the way we feel a lot of the time), then there is no chance whatsoever that on the seven levels of our most mystical teachings, we will ferret out God. Especially not when the seven levels themselves are only a meager human salute toward infinity. “Can we, by searching, find out God?”

Christmas is never about our searching. It is about our being found. The phrase that would really be more accurate for most of us, most of the time, would be: “Caught from behind.” More than one of us (sitting here acting peaceful tonight) could attest to the fact that we have played in that strange, living football game. Do you know which one I mean? Where we are running pell-mell down the field, ducking and dodging, for all we’re worth, all the pitfalls and problems and other people that we think are trying to stop us. And we carry, tucked away in our arm somewhere, this “notion of something important” – this worthless pigskin full of air that somebody once told us was the object of the game. And we are giving it all we’ve got, day after day, year after year, and nobody is even paying us a million bucks to do it, nor is any crowd cheering us on (except maybe somewhere in our deepest imagination). Some of us have played in that game. Until, while running wildly down the field one day, we were tackled from behind – tackled cleanly and completely by a player we didn’t even know was playing. That is how quite a few of us met God.

It can make us pretty angry at first: Not fair. No jersey number. Too many players on the field. We have the rules all figured out, and “this guy” breaks ’em all. Not only that, but all the other players have gone on playing and are getting way far ahead of us. And not only that, but we lost the pigskin in that last tackle, and it’s getting harder and harder to keep focused on what we were doing and why we were doing it in the first place. I don’t know why we always lose the pigskin when God tackles us. For some reason, God never did like pigs – at least that’s the rumor.

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Anyway, that is a more accurate picture of how we are usually out “searching” for God. Then sometimes – after a few temper-tantrums, and maybe after some considerable sorrow and fear subside – sometimes God is able to communicate a little better, and we are able to pull ourselves away from the game mentality long enough to wonder why we were doing it. And the folk running on the field and getting way ahead of us? It doesn’t matter so much when we see that their game doesn’t really mean anything lasting or important anyway.

“Can we, by searching, find out God?” Yes, but only when God tackles us from behind. After a few times, some of us at least start *watching out* for God. We maybe switch to volleyball or skiing, anything that does not involve pig – not that there is any guarantee we will not be tackled again anyway. On the other hand, though it is hard to explain or describe, there is a definite thrill to the experience. Coming into contact with the Almighty has an indescribable impact – a powerful but inescapable residue. Old games lose their luster. We start wondering if there are ways we could invite God back, or maybe we could just walk together sometime instead of playing tackle. And finally we start pondering some other questions: Since God doesn’t seem to care much about the rules or goals of most of our games, is there some other game that God is playing? And could we ever learn to play that one?

So you see, we *do* start searching. Even though without God we cannot do any of the finding, yet we do start searching – wondering if there are ways to cooperate, ways to be ready, ways to invite The Presence. The Light not only finds us, but draws us. And Christmas is always proclaiming that indeed there is Light, and that indeed it is coming for us – that it is wanting and longing to be with us.

WAITING (collecting & recollecting) (one minute)

So on this special night, when we are gathered to feel the warmth of our hope and the comfort of each other’s faith, let us go quietly within to await the One who comes for us.

ANTHEM *All My Heart This Night Rejoices*

SCRIPTURE **John 1:1-14**

CAROL *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

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Meditation A GREAT LIGHT

We humans have always been fascinated by the play of light and shadow in our world – the way it changes the appearance of all things, making even the same objects look ever different. We draw endless meaning from the interplay of light with darkness: shadow, cloud, sunbeam, starlight. Light is ever the symbol and hope of Life. *“And God said, ‘Let there be light.’*” Even if nobody told us, instinctively we know that this is the beginning, at least for us.

It is possible to trace the whole history of humankind as a tracking and a hungering for the light: How it inspired and changed us forever to learn we could call forth fire. How it inspired and changed us forever to learn we could harness electricity. Yet for all the physical transformations of our fascination with the light, it is, in a way, merely a feeble symbol of far greater LIGHT.

“Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!” (Psalm 43:3)

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”
(Psalm 119:105)

“The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.” (Proverbs 4:18)

“I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” (Isaiah 42:6)

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

Of course, we are skeptical of claims about Light – claims to *be* Light – that do not seem authentic. There is more than one way to get burned. Perhaps the worst burns of all are from the flame we thought was true flame that turns out to have no true light or life at all. Nevertheless, we cannot help but be stirred whenever Light comes or calls. It simply IS the symbol of truth, and of God. Hard to see a great sunrise without feeling HOPE lift within us. Hard to see true Light break through anywhere without wanting to live a little better, dare a little more, be part of something greater than ourselves.

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Little wonder, then, that Christmas grips us so. If only ... If only its claims are true: that God really does come into the world, and that in this coming, our own lives are revealed to have significance and purpose. And if only it really is possible for us to become friends and go on together – with this Light that lightens our darkness; with this man who is more than a man; with this flame of truth and love that offers to lead us unto eternity; with this *“Light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.”*

“I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.... I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” (John 8:12; 12:46) *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”* (Isaiah 9:2)

We come here tonight not to learn it, but to drink it in – to let it seep deeper into our souls. Real Christmas is always more than we suspect; always driving out more dark than we knew we had within us; always raising up HOPE we thought was out of style; ever calling us to LIFE again with a God we thought we had given up on, or who we *thought* had given up on us.

WAITING (collecting & recollecting) (one minute)

Let us spend another moment in silence.

ANTHEM *O Holy Night*

SCRIPTURE **Isaiah 58:6-10; Matthew 5:14-16;
John 12:35-36; Ephesians 5:8-10**

OFFERING *Glad Noel*

CAROL *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Meditation **CHILDREN OF LIGHT**

So here we sit, and the night is lovely, and the people around us are friends. We are grateful to be here. Tomorrow is a favorite day in our society, and all of us remember loved ones, and many of us get to be with special loved ones. We have come here to wait for the great day on purpose – to be awake and watchful as the Message and the Invitation steal into our minds and hearts yet one more time.

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So the last aspect or facet of Christmas Light is obvious and disconcerting and hard to take, in a strange and beautiful way. We cannot receive the Light – we cannot know Jesus as the Light of the world, not for very long – without starting to become “children of the Light.” Oh, not that we don’t *want* to. We do! We do! It is just such a strange notion. There’s nothing like God’s presence to make us all shy. Yet it is clearly part of the Christmas drama and Message – clearly part of God’s purpose all along. We do not have much trouble seeing and acknowledging that Jesus is the Light of the world. But then He says to us directly: “You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14)

So we sit here together, relatively comfortable. And we love Christmas and fully intend to celebrate it. We even understand it as the beginning of the whole Incarnation affair. And however incomplete and inadequate all our words and celebrations are, Jesus is incredible and wonderful, and He brings Light into the world apart from which it would be staggering for most of us to contemplate going on with life.

Yet we know full well that His Light is supposed to be lighting each one of us. And we come here anyway? Is that delightful or what! Does that make you want to hug and kiss each other? (But not yet; contain yourselves a little longer.) Does it make you want to support and back and affirm each other? And do you not see a little more, all along, the Light that emanates from other followers? Do you not know that it is true of you as well?

We are not talking any perfection nonsense here. We are just saying that you cannot hang around with the Light and love the Light for very long without becoming children of the Light.

There is still a lot to do, and tomorrow we get to take a day off, but don’t forget that the coming of Jesus is a full-circle affair. If we celebrate it very seriously, we end up in the loop – part of the Life and part of the Light. That is why He came. “*For so the Lord commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.’*” (Acts 13:47)

Hey, this IS the uttermost parts of the earth! Do you know how far it is from here to Jerusalem? You have already made it; you are already here. Now all you have to do is shine. (Pray every day. Study the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God’s will for your own life on a daily basis. Love each other. Tithe if you are ready. Keep following the great adventure.)

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“Rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to what you have seen and what you shall yet see of me.” (Acts 26:16) Nothing fancy. Just sharing what you yourself have really known and done and been through: your experience, strength, and hope. We are not trying to give away anything we do not have. We are not pretending we have to do it all, or that we have to do it without Him. Pretty incredible, isn't it? And that should certainly be part of our celebration.

We seek light until God finds us. Eventually the Great Light breaks through all the lesser lights. And for any of us, that is always when we discover that God is real for us personally, that God comes to us personally, that God loves us personally. But we cannot be in such a place for very long without starting to become children of the Light ourselves. So welcome to Christmas!

WAITING (one minute)

Let us take a moment to offer our individual and personal greetings and thank yous to Jesus.

RECEIVING THE LIGHT

As most of us know, the Light has been waiting for us for as far back as we can remember. There is a strange, almost eerie realization that it was there before we were willing to receive it. It is a great mystery that we have to be willing to receive Light before we feel or see it. Nevertheless, it is true. And knowing that now, we also know that there is more to be received. So we symbolize this in our celebration as well. We take light from the altar. It comes to us from others, and it goes through us to others. But we must also be willing to receive it.

So may it be – for all of us.

CAROL *Silent Night, Holy Night*

BENEDICTION

Deep peace of Christ, the light of the world, be unto you – each and every one of you – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

WELCOME EACH OTHER TO CHRISTMAS