

Christmas Eve Meditation 2020

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Philip Brook’s popular Christmas hymn describes

God’s promise, hope that drives away our fear and dread
the way a bright light overcomes even the deepest darkness...

... as we heard earlier, (Isaiah 9:2, John 1:9)

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. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

This passage from Isaiah

was written during a troubled, dark and difficult time in Israel.

The increasingly corrupt leaders were turning the nation astray.

It was a time of gross immorality, injustice & economic disaster.

The nation was being threatened by powerful enemies,
by both the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires...

... and against that threat the king of Israel was considering
a military alliance with Egypt that turned out to be disastrous.

The prophet Isaiah’s message was don’t rely on a military solution,

God’s got this so don’t make a foolish alliance with Egypt,

but instead trust and rely on God’s truth and promises
to bring you through & beyond the situation you’re facing.

And given as a hopeful sign of God’s promise, a child has been born,

which was probably referring to the future king Hezekiah,

a light of hope for those enduring the present darkness.

Eight centuries later, the gospel-writers of Matthew and Luke recognized that the birth of Jesus was also a sign of God's promise,
a light of hope for those who had been walking in darkness.

It's also a welcome word of hope and assurance we too need to hear, for this year, these past months especially, have been difficult.

We know too well about scary, dark corners in the basements of life, and about trying to find our way through fear, loss and darkness...
... for these are not the easiest or best of times we are living through.

There is terrible and destructive upheaval in the world around us, our nation's bitter politics and the pandemic still with us. For many, these are very troubling days of darkness and uncertainty, and none of us knows for sure what our tomorrow may hold for us.

There are also other more personal and closer to home dark places, health and emotional issues, employment and financial concerns, or young people facing hard choices concerning an uncertain future.

Darkness can come in many forms that can threaten to overwhelm us. From the gospel of John we read of promise & hope in Christ: Jn 1:4-5

What came 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.

It is a bit gross, but the power of light shining into a dark place reminds me of when a friend and I were going to go surfcasting, and so he set out a package of frozen mullet for us to use as bait. While we were waiting for it to thaw out on his kitchen counter, we had some time, so we stepped out to get some dinner.

When we got back to his house, he flipped on the kitchen light, and his kitchen counter was moving, it was black and crawling with thousands of cockroaches all around the thawing mullet. But they scattered into the walls, down the sink & across the floor

to escape the light. They disappeared into the shadows of darkness.

The Light of Jesus comes as a powerful promise and hope
that the darkness cannot and will not overcome the Light.

The light exposes and triumphs, the light drives out the darkness.

As Jesus explained, John 8:12

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness
but will have the light of life."

I am the Light –

that comes seeking the lost, the hurting and broken-hearted.

I am the candle at home, that's always lit by the window,

that can be seen glowing in the darkness from far away,

and that will comfort and guide you back home again.

I am the lighthouse, piercing the fierce stormy darkness

with warning of hidden hazard, as your safe beacon of hope.

I am your surgeon's laser

burning away cancer and disease, a powerful light that heals.

I am the Light that shines into the dark hidden places of human hurt,

that dispels your fear and worry, your sense of hopeless dread,

for I am with you and I will not abandon or forsake you ever...

... in fact, I came seeking the lost, the wounded and weary

to bring you to wonderful and meaningful life in abundance.

The Light of Jesus comes as a powerful promise of enduring hope,

as the One whose life and mission demonstrated the amazing truth,

that we are indeed loved & precious and **that** we do matter to God,

that we actually can have a living relationship with the Lord,
that there is real possibility for fresh start and power to change...
... **and that the amazing truth of that Light can redirect
how we confront our challenges and live out our lives.**

Jesus is a light that reveals and guides, and gives life ...
... enabling us to live beyond a mere existence **of passing time,**
or just going through the motions **of surviving another day.**

The true light is not just a bright spot shining in the dark,
but **His Light** defies, drives back, and defeats the darkness,
for Jesus is the True Light, infinitely greater than the darkness,
whose healing and cleansing is greater than the disease,
who brings joy greater than our sorrow or loss
and a peace far greater than our worst fear or anxiety...

... which explains why
our Christmas Eve celebration includes lots of lit candles...

... for we need to be reminded again and again, year after year,
of the True Light and hope in this world so lost in darkness,

... for in fact, the deeper the darkness, the brighter the light.

By far the most meaningful and powerful Christmas I've experienced
was at a time when my dreams were falling apart & my life a disaster,
during one of the worst and most unsettled periods of my life.

Deep dark feelings of despair, of regret, defeat and failure,

had me dreading and wanting to avoid the whole Christmas scene
with all its joyful celebration and being around other people.
And yet Christmas that year deepened my faith and my understanding,
for that deep darkness I felt, **powerfully stripped away**
all the unnecessary clutter and tinsel from my Christmas.

I experienced the God who is with us **amid our struggle and suffering**,
giving us hope even in the face of failure, grief & disappointment.

It was then and there, that Christmas I learned and experienced
how precious and utterly reliable God's gift of grace truly is,
and the gracious nature and love, the mercy and purpose of God
that's most perfectly & truthfully revealed in Jesus Christ...
... who shines into our darkness, keeping us from giving up in despair.

Though the difficult situations and hard trials of our lives
may not change simply because we celebrate the birth of Christ,
yet that coming Light can and does radically change
how we see them, how we react and respond to them...

... giving us the hope, tenacity and courage we need to endure...
... for as the Apostle Paul wrote, (Col. 1:13, 2 Cor. 9:15)

He has rescued us from the power of darkness ... Thanks be to God for
his indescribable gift!

Tonight our sanctuary is filled with the light of candles,
as a reminder that Jesus is truly the Light of the world—

- a reminder of God's promise and enduring powerful assurance
that the truth is we are all precious and deeply loved by God,
and even the deepest darkness cannot defeat or overpower his love.

This year, perhaps again more than ever, I need to hear afresh
the amazing mystery and the wonder of the Christmas story.

I need to grasp anew this rich and transforming truth one more time,
the blessing & healing hope, joy, peace and love of Jesus Christ,
who comes, and who makes God present and powerful in my life...

... so let us, here in this worship service be refreshed & filled anew,
be blessed by this Light that can and does make whole & overcomes
even the deepest, most scary and destructive darkness we dread.

For the power of that Light is true, it's real and available to us all.

Tonight, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit,
let the words of the story we've heard so many times
proclaim God's promise and truth in a fresh new way...

**... and may that Light shine in our hearts, tonight and always,
that we may also faithfully reflect that Light out to others.**

As we read in Ephesians 5:8,

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.
Live as children of light—