

... and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Worship on Christmas Eve proclaims God's love, mercy and grace,
that uniquely & powerfully touches us with God's promise & hope.

**It is our hopeful celebration for all that God has done for us
declaring God's love and light over the darkness of this world
and continues to remind us that the best is still yet to come.**

This is a wonderful night, so holy & joyful, so sacred & meaningful,
a precious treasure to ponder, to drink in its mystery deeply,
to allow God's grace & hope to flow into our hearts and lives,
to hold and embrace the coming of Jesus into our lives and our world.

During seminary, for one of my classes on ancient spirituality,
we spent a long weekend at a Roman Catholic retreat center,
where a Jesuit priest explained and introduced us
to the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

We began by listening very carefully as a Scripture text was read,
and then all alone, in silent and prayerful contemplation,
try to imagine yourself physically in that biblical situation.

The last and most powerful one for me was to picture myself
at the stable with the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth.

The priest suggested that in my mind, I slowly approach the stable,
focus on seeing and trying to identify who was there,
and try to experience the sights, the sounds and smells.

Then he said I should go inside and observe what was in the stable.

I felt connected in that story and the Nativity experience,
and the meditation began to feel very real, like I was there.

In my mind, I saw the shadows, heard the sounds, smelled the odors,
there I was there at the stable, and then finally I stepped inside.

It was not the bright, clean and beautiful like a Christmas card,
but rustic and simple with smells & sounds of a stable & animals.

It was dark and mysterious, and I was barely able to see
except for the flickering flame of a small smoky fire,

and it seemed and felt like I was really there.

As I watched, I saw Mary lifting the infant Jesus from the manger,
then glancing in my direction, she held him out for me to hold.

Suddenly I felt very uneasy, unworthy and uncomfortable,
hesitant & wishing that someone else would hold baby Jesus,

Ever since then, I wondered why I deferred and reacted that way.

It was a fascinating **mystic-experience** that I still think about.

Christmas Eve, hearing the Christmas story and all the special music
is a uniquely special place to meet and experience Jesus Christ,
a good place to be found, encouraged & invited by him to follow,
where we can pause, wonder and think about God and his love,
experience & rest in God's comforting & welcoming presence.

It's our hopeful & joyful celebration for what God has done for us,
and the light of hope that can heal darkened and discouraged lives.

For many, the quiet of Christmas Eve worship,
this may be the most peaceful moment you've had for some time,
and it may be a while before you can be this still & calm again.

And this moment of quiet stillness and reflection, a to refocus
and remember that there is more to us **than just our activities**,
that some things do matter more **than success in this world**,
that we are worth more **than just what we accomplish in life**,
that we do matter to God, who sent Jesus because he loves each of us.

Christmas is about our God who never has and never will give up on us,
for there is always more grace, mercy, peace and acceptance
then any of us can possibly conceive, imagine or ever use up,
for he came not to condemn the world but to save the world.

Christmas Eve is such a quiet place of presence, joy and solitude,
where God comes to his weary, besieged & fatigued people saying,
just stop whatever you are doing, listen and relax with me,
receive my blessings & grace, and trust that I am with you...
... pause, be still & discover what it means that I am your gracious God.

One of the tales of the Winnie-the-Pooh storybook
describes the scene of Pooh-bear coming down the stairs,
being dragged along behind Christopher Robin,
his head banging on each step, bump, bump, bump.

“It is as far as Pooh bear knew the only way of coming downstairs,
but sometimes he felt there really might be another way,
if only he would stop bumping for a moment and think of it.”

So too, we can so caught up in the getting ready, meeting our goals,
so busy in our activities, in accomplishing and succeeding,
that the main event -- the arrival and wonder of Jesus,
gets lost amid our life's frantic rush and confusion.

In truth, Christmas is not really a human activity at all,
but is entirely God's doing and is entirely God's gift to us.

Christmas is the story of our eternal & infinitely powerful God,
shrinking himself all the way down to a little human baby.
And it is in that act of grace and compassion
that the glory and love of the Lord is revealed,
the promise and truth that God is with us, and that God is for us.

The birth of Christ is proof that God is not angry or against us,
that God is not upset, or frustrated or even disappointed with us,
**and his coming as a powerless little baby shows that
it's not about harsh judgment, wrath or condemnation.**

The birth of Jesus opens up to us the possibility of knowing God,

**for us to receive something worthy to fill-in our emptiness,
to feed and satisfy our spiritual hunger and deepest longing.**

So we don't need to have all the answers or to be living perfect lives.

It's enough to know that the God who came as the Christ child,
is the God who loves each one of us, calls us precious beloved,
and who welcomes us by his mercy to yet another second chance,
as many as we need, **for the fountain of grace never runs dry.**

**The point and meaning of Christmas is that our God does love us,
wants to have an authentic and growing relationship with us,
and actually we were created to enjoy the Lord God forever.**

And it would be tragic for us to leave here tonight without allowing
the Lord's loving and healing touch to bless us and strengthen us.

**For me, that is how I understand the gift of Christmas grace,
the true and healing light shining into our darkest places,
the light of hope that keeps us from giving up in despair...**

... as God has promised, 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.

**But we may wonder how does the light,
how does the coming of Jesus actually change anything?**

Though the difficult and harsh situations and 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 will and the courage we need to endure,
to trust and wait upon the Lord's purpose and blessing,
the Light that overcomes the darkness around all us, 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.

The Christmas story is about the True Light who overcomes darkness and who brings God's promise and hope of new possibilities, a real reason to believe beyond what the human eye can see.

Like turning on a light in a darkened room, our worship this night can guide and transform our perceptions and how we see things, which might even change how we choose to live out our lives.

My friends, Jesus Christ is that great light, the Light of the world, and that is why we share and light candles on Christmas Eve.

In a few moments, we will light our candles as **symbol** and **reminder**, a symbol of Jesus' birth, the Light of the world, a reminder of the promise and hope that Jesus brings --- that we are all precious and deeply loved by God, and even the deepest darkness cannot defeat or overpower his love.

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

- **Christ** who came more than 2000 years ago as a baby in Bethlehem,
- **Christ**, presently at work in our lives and in our world,
- **Christ**, who will surely come again in glory someday.

May God, give us courage to bear witness to the impossible possibility of a different kind of world—to a way of peace that is not only how the world can be but how it shall be when Christ returns and the glory of the Lord floods the whole earth! Even so, come Lord Jesus! Amen.