

Christmas Eve Meditation 2024

Ephesians 5:8-9,

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

One part of the wonder, blessing and mystery of a Christian's life,  
is that **we cannot predict nor do we have any control over**  
**just when we're going to take a step closer to the Lord God.**

It is entirely **a gift and blessing** because of God's relentless love  
that never ceases or quits even if we reject or somehow slip away.

All of us can recall specific events and unexpected circumstances  
where we have felt and experienced **the loving embrace of grace,**  
that brought about an amazing deepening of our walk of faith,  
**which strengthened our hope, our trust and relationship with God.**

It is also true that sometimes, we somehow slip away somewhat,  
and may find ourselves feeling less connected & **faith-vibrant.**

We don't mean to reject the Lord, but somehow it can gradually happen,  
as over time we can become less active & passionate about our faith,  
and then find that church & things of religion don't seem to matter.  
I don't think we plan to drift away, but nevertheless sometimes we do.

Growing up, our family was always very active in our church's life,  
and it seemed we were there just about every time the doors opened.  
Attending worship each week and participating in church activities  
was just what our family did as a part of our shared journey of faith.

Later on, as an adult I had some troubling experiences as an elder,  
and got super-busy with my life, career and building a business.  
I didn't stop believing as much as I gradually lost interest.

Mostly, church and religion didn't fit into my lifestyle anymore,  
and I was quite content just to just drop it and not worry about it.  
I really didn't deny, renounce or reject my Christian faith,  
but I didn't see it as all that important or relevant anymore.

Gradually I started attending church less, and then stopped entirely  
and was quite content to not think about church, faith and religion.

It was during those years, that while at a party on Christmas eve  
a friend asked me to go with him to a candlelight church service.  
Now he wasn't anymore religious than I was,  
but there was a pew in the church with a brass name plate,  
that had given in loving memory of his late mother.

That Christmas Eve, he was missing her and wanted to sit in 'her pew',  
so, I agreed to tag along and try to keep him company,  
and planned to enjoy the Christmas music & ignore the sermon.

I went in realizing that I would probably feel a little bit guilty  
about how I was living my life & that I ought to do church now & then.

Having offended God, I expected that church on Christmas Eve  
would feel a bit like getting sent to the principal's office.  
Unpleasant, but you survive. You get over it and go on with your life.

That night, hearing the scripture lessons and listening to the choir,  
singing familiar and favorite Christmas carols, surprised me.  
I didn't feel God's anger. I felt comfort, like a warm embrace,  
and I experienced compassion, like a gentle caring caress.

I didn't feel the wrathful and harsh judgment of an angry God,  
but rather I felt real warmth & gentle care, **as if God did love me,  
maybe even more than he disapproved of my sins and failures.**

In some inexplicable way, I sensed that the God of the universe,  
wanted me to feel his gracious love, forgiveness and kindness.  
**I felt God's love through Jesus, the Light shining into my darkness,**  
the truth of God's unrelenting love and his desire to bless us,  
**the same grace that has the power to grow, heal & transform us.**

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.**

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.**

I felt Jesus with me, the miracle of God's gracious love,  
**and that was a most powerful and meaningful hope and insight.**

I was no theologian, I had not thought it out, but for that night,  
that simple moment of grace and recognition was enough.  
I didn't have to have the all the answers and explanations.

It didn't matter that I was unfamiliar with most of the Bible,  
and that the part that I had read, didn't make much sense.  
It was enough to experience & receive the invitation of God's grace,  
as it is written in Ephesians, 5:8-9,

**For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

I retold that story about my Christmas Eve experience with grace  
as a just-out-of-seminary-new-pastor at our 1st Christmas eve,  
and I felt nervous about describing my own spiritual struggles,  
but I wanted to be clear about why that service meant so much to me.

After the service a young man & his girlfriend wanted to talk with me.  
He and his girlfriend were visiting his parents for Christmas  
and they had all come as a family to all worship together,  
though he had pretty much left & rejected God and church  
when he had grown up, and left home to live on his own.

But that night something in the worship service spoke to him,  
bringing back memories of when he used to walk with the Lord,  
and he wanted to know, and he really asking me  
if and how he might get reconnected with God again.

**Like a bright light crossing the distance and piercing his darkness  
something had shined in as God's invitation, promise and hope.**

I explained that it turns out that to start with, **it is enough**,  
just to believe that God loves us and he sent Jesus to give us life.

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.**

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.

**Jesus came as the light of God, lovingly wrapped in human flesh,  
here to reveal the awesome depth of God's love, mercy and grace.**

Jesus is God's Christmas gift to us,

born a helpless baby in that stable in Bethlehem,  
and in Christ, taking on our infirmity, sin and suffering,  
which is the ultimate expression of mercy, grace and love.

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,  
**and that is why we share and light candles on Christmas Eve.**

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

Christmas eve celebrates the Light of God reaching out to us ,  
our infinite Creator revealing unending love, joy and hope,  
because the Lord is real and powerful, merciful & compassionate,  
**and all loved and valued by our merciful, compassionate God.**

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.**

**Christmas eve is a uniquely special place to meet Jesus Christ,  
a good place to be found, welcomed and invited by him to follow.**

In a few moments, we will light our candles as **symbol** and **reminder**,  
a symbol of the birth of Jesus, 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.**