Christmas Eve Midnight (10 PM)

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I bought a flashlight the other day for my car. Safety experts say that every driver should keep a flashlight in their car. One of my failings as a driver is that I have not done so in the past. Periodically, I think about it, but never when I am in any place where flashlights are for sale. However, now I finally have a flashlight in my glove compartment. You never know when you’ll need light on a dark night. And it’s an LED bulb, expected to last for a good, long time.

Tonight, we experience an unusual and highly opportune collision of religious observances. Tonight, we Christians begin the celebration of 12 days of Christmas; Tonight, also, our Jewish brothers and sisters begin the celebration of 8 days of Chanukkah. Both celebrate the miracle of God’s love and mercy, and intervention into the human estate to effect salvation. Both celebrations center on light. The kind that is eternal, and unwavering.

The Jewish festival of Chanukkah is the Festival of Lights. It celebrates a miraculous event in the history of the People of God. Nearly two hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ the Son of God, a small band of the Jewish people of Jerusalem managed to overthrow the mighty but oppressive Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus IV, who had tried to wipe out their worship of God. They reclaimed their land and rededicated their Temple. When they went to re-light the Temple’s Menorah (the seven-branched candelabrum), they could find only a single cruse of oil (enough for one day), which, miraculously, lasted for eight days, until more oil could be ritually prepared. The people took this as a sign of God’s renewed presence and protection of the Jewish people.

Christmas celebrates the coming God into the world in the person of Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior, Son of God, the Word-made-flesh, Emmanuel, God-with us. We give him many names. The Nicene Creed calls him Light from Light. Our Jewish ancestors in the faith expected the Messiah to come as a warrior and defeat their enemies once and for all. They expected the Messiah to come riding in on the clouds as his chariot, trailing clouds of glory and armies of angels, they expected he would be dressed as a mighty warrior-king, wielding a sword of power. Instead, he came among us as one of us, in the most humble of circumstances, and yet the most miraculous.

Instead of coming into this world clothed in silks and crowned with gold as a majestic king residing in a palace, the Lord of Glory came into this world in a stable, as a vulnerable, squalling infant, whose mother, Luke tells us, wrapped him in swaddling bands, probably torn from her own cloak, and laid him to sleep in a manger – the feeding trough of the animals – because there was no room for them in the inn. He entered this world homeless, and not long after, with Mary his mother and Joseph, her husband, he would become a refugee, on the run from a powerful and oppressive government. And all of this, Luke tells us, was while Quirinius was Governor of Syria, a country which, even today, is in the news as a place of bloodshed, oppression, war, and homeless refugees. Jesus the Christ came among us to stand with us and strengthen us, encourage us, comfort us in all the darkest places to which our lives may take us. He came, as the Advent blessing says, as light to “scatter the darkness from before our path.”

Light is a symbol of the power and Presence of God for both Chanukkah and Christmas. Light is the symbol of hope and security in times of fear. Temptation is always at hand, and fear is our greatest temptation. Fear is the temptation not to trust that God is present and at work for good, even when we cannot see it at the moment, and there are many moments in this world where war, terrorism, violence both domestic and foreign, so many disasters of the natural world, ven darkness in these situations is all-powerful. But in this little child was Light, and, as the Evangelist John has said, “the Light was the life of the world.” Even the darkness could not overcome it.

Luke tells us that angels sang of the birth of this holy child. They sang to the shepherds, who were keeping their flocks in the nearby fields. Shepherds were the lowest of the low class. Like the Child Jesus, they really had no home – they followed their sheep from pasture to pasture. The angels sang to them of the good news of the birth of this little child, and, as the carol says, “glory shone around.” Their message brought light to the darkness of that hillside. Their message began, “Do not be afraid.” This Child will cast away the power of fear to hold people hostage from the freedom to love. This Child will struggle with and overcome the power of death to hold us hostage from heaven’s glory. This Child will cast away the power of sin and death and bring mercy and everlasting light and life to all.

Luke tells us of angels and shepherds. But Matthew tells us of “wise men from the East” who came to pay homage to this Child, and who were led to him by the light of a very special Star; a star probably like the one pictured in the painting to my left (I’ll bet you wondered when I would get to that!). This is the Year of the Star – throughout this year, we will be reading from the Gospel of Matthew of the life, death, and resurrection of this Child Jesus, Savior of the world, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Light from Light. I wonder how many of you have seen this painting before? The artist if Peter Marcisz, one of our very own. Most of you know him as fellow parishioner, Vestry member, choir member and Cantor (Peter wears many hats) but you may not know him as the very fine painter that he is. This painting of All Saints’ Church was done in 2009, a year before I arrived here. I think it says a lot about light, especially about the light of Christ, and how that light infuses us here with the goodness and love and saving power of God.

The Star which shines over our church building in this picture is echoed in the cross on the front of the church. I don’t think that’s an accident. From manger to Calvary, from birth to death, the power of God to hold and lead is given to us in Christ. It’s a quiet sort of scene, much like the words of the Austrian carol which the Choir sang at the Introit tonight: “Still, still, still; all is hushed/the world is sleeping/Holy Star its vigil keeping.” In the darkness of the night, the snow of the “bleak midwinter” is gently bathed in light by the star, and light, pouring out from within the building, welcomes those who seek the Light of Love. Paintings of the Holy Family in the stable on that first Christmas, like the one on the cover of your bulletin, show the scene being lit by the Light of Christ shining from within him to illuminate the other figures in the tableau.

A lot of people are moved to offer peace and good will, food, and clothes to the poor at Christmas time. But this congregation, year ‘round, offers hope and comfort to the poor, the homeless, the outcast by offering support to Wolcott school children and families in need; by providing scholarship assistance to graduating seniors; by providing food for the Wolcott Food Pantry; by providing space for eight twelve-step meetings each week. We who, by the grace of God are children of God through Baptism, have become the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus the Savior in our own day. We bring to a world wrapped in the darkness of sin and fear the angels’ message of hope and comfort: “Don’t be afraid! God is here.” To each and every anxious, fearful, joyful or sorrowful person: “There is no one that God loves more than you.” In that message are met the hopes and fears of all the years.

Merry Christmas.