

Sermon for 12/24/11, 11 p.m.
Christmas Eve B

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

We here at Trinity have been singing and reflecting on this hymn throughout the past Advent season. That season of preparation, of getting ready for this night, this special night. When we remember and rejoice and celebrate that the Son of God did appear. That God has come into our lives, incarnate—in the very flesh—through his birth in the person of Emmanuel—“God With Us.” That is, in the person of Jesus Christ—yes, even little baby Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, away in a manger in that simple stable surrounded by oxen and donkeys and shepherds. The Light of God and the Light of the World has finally arrived, heralded by the light from the star of Bethlehem, its flame kindled in our lives and hearts, blazing like a yule log before us.

During the season of Advent as I was preparing myself for Christmas—this very night—I was meditating on this symbol of Light.

Another verse from our Advent hymn implores,

O come, thou Dayspring from on high, and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.

We celebrate tonight this very light. This Light of the World, this Dayspring from on high, that disperses gloom and sadness and evil and even death's dark shadow. This light is unlike any other light we may know: more powerful than the biggest bonfire, more focused than the steadiest spotlight, wider than the broadest floodlight, deeper than the most penetrating searchlight, able to shine into every nook and cranny and corner of our lives.

This light is the Light of God. The light we long for in our lives. And the light we receive as a gift from God on this night when we long for so many other gifts, none of which may be able to satisfy or satiate or comfort or heal or purify us as much as the Light of God.

This light was around before anything else existed, because this Light is from and of and one with God. And God gave this light to the world first at the foundation of the universe. Genesis 1 tells us the story of God's creation.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. (Gen. 1:3-4)

On that very first Christmas Day over 2,000 years ago, God did the same again but in a new way. God, knowing that salvation and grace come only through himself, decided to come among us in the flesh, as a human baby, who would grow up to become a holy savior for us. As at his first creation, God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God from God, and Light from Light, as our Creed reminds us, was born. And God saw that the light was good, born from the Virgin Mary in a star-lit stable.

This Light of the World came among us, born for us, by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, so that we might be delivered from the bondage of sin, and receive power to become God's children. Indeed, this God-Light became human flesh, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, and finally to reconcile us back to God.

This Light was born into our lives because of the darkness that comes from being imperfect, broken, sinful people living in an imperfect, broken, and sinful world. Perhaps there can't be light without this darkness—this darkness which surrounds us, which is something we all experience. Maybe you've experienced it in various ways during this past year.

I think of darkness as a loss, certainly a loss of light, but perhaps a loss of other things as well.

I've talked with many people over the past year who have lost health, affected by sickness or illness or brokenness or cancer. Some regain the strength and health they are looking for, while others don't or can't, suffering along or waiting for healing.

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I've talked with others who have lost jobs or income or housing. As we're all more familiar with than we'd like to be, the economy has continued to slump and rollick and refuse to improve in a helpful way. Some have found new employment or raises or new housing, while others manage without or on less, and others suffer waiting for this recession to end.

Finally, others have lost loved ones who were close to them. Many during this past year have mourned and grieved the deaths of mothers and fathers, grandparents, children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, aunts and uncles... Death, indeed, is the final loss, the final darkness...but it is not the final end.

In all these losses and dark times, we know from the experience of our lives that life does not stop there. Loss is a part of our life, but it is not the end nor God's will for us. God is all about transformation, salvation, redemption, and making things new. We celebrate this wonderful, marvelous, awesome aspect of God at Christmastime. We celebrate that in an imperfect, broken, and sinful world, something new happened: a perfect, pure, and sinless savior was born into our lives. To bring back the light where the darkness was thought to have won.

In those dark places where physical illness or sickness or cancer were thought to have won, the birth of Jesus' Light reminds us that healing is possible. Healing may be found through medicine or prayer or laughter or friendship or the love between family and friends. And while God doesn't promise us healing in this life, Jesus' gift to us is that we will be made perfect through the purifying Light of God in the next.

Likewise, in those dark places where financial loss or unemployment or homelessness were thought to have won, the birth of Jesus' Light reminds us that prosperity and abundance are possible. Prosperity may be found through money or employment or success, or perhaps the richness of the love and friendship which we share between one another. Again, God doesn't promise us that we will always be prosperous in this life, but Jesus' gift to us is that we will live abundantly in the lavish love and light of God in the next.

And finally, in those dark places where death was thought to have won, the birth of Jesus' Light reminds us that new life is possible. New life may be found through renewed relationships and friendships with the loved ones who still surround us, and in the births of new children and grandchildren to carry on our legacies. Indeed, God does promise us new life—though perhaps not always in the way we expect—and Jesus' gift to us all is this new life with one another and with God in his eternal light.

At this time of the year, we celebrate the transformation of God into new life through Jesus Christ who thus promises us new life as well. New life came not only on the cross but through the birth of God in the flesh. Old things passed away and new things were brought to light. And just as 2011 and all its joys and sorrows will soon pass away, so will 2012 bring new birth and new life for all of us, along with its own joys and, yes, sorrows. But if we're able to remember and celebrate Christ's birth on this night, then we should be able to remember the salvation that he brings and the new life that is promised to all of us.

So as we celebrate and remember God's incarnation and power this night, God's breaking forth into the darkness with his impenetrable light, we likewise will share a physical sign of God's power and light a little later in our liturgy. Tonight after our prayers and our communion—our own sharing in the body and blood of this incarnate Christ—we will turn off all the lights here in the church. For a moment, and just a moment, we will let the darkness completely surround us. We will be present to the dark things that may inhabit our lives, for just this moment. And then slowly but surely we will light candles, row by row, little lights to represent for each us of the Light of Christ that we share. The light that came from God at the very first Christmas over 2,000 years ago and which is still present here in our lives over 2,000 years later. We will celebrate and shine forth this light as we sing together "Silent Night." As we remember that Christ our savior was born, the Holy infant so tender and mild, who in his birth brings new birth for us.

On this silent and holy night, may we give thanks to God and pray that all may be calm and bright. May we remember the Son of God, from whose holy face love's pure light radiantly beams, ushering in for us a dawn of redeeming, saving, and amazing grace. So on this night hold your candles high and let your light and the Light of God shine out brightly and steadily. And remember tonight God's gift to us in the birth of his son and the new life that we receive also through his light and life.

May this night be for you a Silent Night and a Holy Night, and may Christ's light keep your spirit bright this Christmas and into the New Year.

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