

Radiance

John 1: 1-5

Christmas Eve 2006

What draws you to this place on this night? Why are you here? Who beckoned you to this sanctuary? For what are you looking or whom? What do you hope to find here which you can't find anywhere else? When you walk through these doors into the dark night, what do you want to take with you? Many folks tell me this is their favorite service of the year. But what is it that speaks to us here, that strikes us, that moves us? This night and Christmas Day are so full of powerful emotions and deep memories, of childhood naiveté and innocence. Whether one is a churchgoer or person of faith or not, there's something about this holiday that stirs up memories, scenes and scents and people that might otherwise be forgotten. We become nostalgic for the past remembered or imagined or hoped for but now gone. We remember times with family around a table full of love. For some, for many this night triggers considerable anxiety and loss, of Christmases that failed to meet expectations or the painful absence around a table. Maybe this service allows emotions to surface that we keep repressed at other times.

But I wonder if something else is also going on. A few weeks ago I was in a discussion with a Roman Catholic friend about the way nighttime worship experiences have a dramatic way of touching the deepest dimensions of the soul. It got me thinking. What exactly is so attractive about Christmas Eve candlelight services, especially ones that begin at midnight, in the middle of the night? When else do we worship at night? Maybe at an evening Ash Wednesday service or Easter Vigil that takes place all night and ends with the first break of light on resurrection morning. We rarely have occasions to worship God at night on a regular basis. Yet, when we do worship in darkness, surrounded by one candle light or many, it touches something profound within us.

Maybe it's the way light and darkness play off each other. The presence of the light seems to deepen the intensity of the darkness. It's the contrast that's defining. In the darkness, just one candle has the capacity to disperse the night and make shadows dance. Psychologists tell us that often what we project upon the world, how we experience reality is in many ways a projection of the soul or psyche from within. Sometimes what's within can only be seen or felt or experienced when it's forced out there in front of us and we're allowed to embrace it. Maybe the play of light and darkness before our eyes reflects the hidden recesses of the soul that are both light and

dark. Seeing the candles in the dark allows us to feel and see what we might be reluctant to embrace.

It was a stroke of genius when the feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ was first celebrated in Rome on 25th December 354, in that the celebration of Christ's birth takes place near the longest night of the year. It is fitting to welcome the Christ child in the dark abyss of winter and night, for "what has come 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 (John 1: 3b-5)." The angels appeared to the shepherds in the night and sent them to Bethlehem in the night (and no one traveled at night because it wasn't safe) to the baby born in the night.

But the night could not define him for in him is life, true life, life-giving life, a life that remains the light of all people. His light shines in the darkness. Maybe the strength of his light shines even greater in the darkness, yet even when we think the darkness might overtake us, his light will not yield. For there is no darkness, whether the cold, silent darkness of space or the cold, silent depths of the human heart that can smother his light. The Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), captured this truth in a stark yet sublime poem entitled, "Nativity:"

The moon is born
and a child is born,
lying among white clothes
as the moon among clouds.

They both shine, but
the light from the one
is abroad in the universe
as among broken glass.¹

On a recent vacation in Italy this fall, I had occasion to visit many art museums. I was impressed by the number of crèche scenes painted across the centuries, whether surrounded by shepherds or magi or his adoring mother, most of the artists located the source of light on the canvass coming from the face of Jesus. His radiance illuminated the scene and the faces of everyone looking on. His face is the source of radiance and when we look at him, so too, our faces become illuminated and become transformed. "For with you, God, is the fountain of life," said the psalmist "in your light we see light (Psalm 36)." Or as Paul said of Christ, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the

¹ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945-1990* (Phoenix Press, 2000), 508.

glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another,... (2 Cor. 3:18).” To see him is to see the glory of God.

One of our budding theologians came home from his day at our Child Care Center to share what he learned from Miss Liz. “Mommy,” he said, “guess what the angels said on Christmas?” “What?” said his mother. “FEAR NOT!” What does that mean? “It means not to be afraid of the dark or lightning, or anything.” Why’s that? Who will keep you safe? his mother asked. “God will, silly!” That’s the hope that calls us here. I believe the human soul longs for this and knows where to find it. The message to the shepherds is one of many signs given to us that the hope is fulfilled, for us as Christians most definitively and exhaustively in the face of Jesus Christ. I’m enough of a Calvinist to believe it’s the Spirit who draws us here tonight, with all of our longings and hopes and fears, and invites us to gaze upon his face to reflect his radiance, to behold the wonder and glory of God’s love in the flesh. For in his light we see light even in the dark. This is something we can all take with us this night into the dark.

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