

CHRISTMAS EVE

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. Isaiah 9.2

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:20

I hope all of you have some happy memories of Christmas Eve and Christmas. I know everyone doesn't. In fact, a dear friend of mine emailed me this the other day:

Christmas Eve sermon? You're the master, but I will tell you what's been lacking at our joint this advent season: a word of comfort, of hope. It seems to me that that's what the light in the darkness, the star in the sky, the coming and going of the eclipse are all about. And if our clergy would look out at our congregation and register all the pain and befuddlement on the faces there... maybe they'd be reminded of what a bitch time of year this is for the world of misfits like our parish. Missing long-gone moms, dreading seeing moms, uncomfortable partner intros, hard silences between long-time partners, sudden deaths, money problems, losing a 'pillar' of the parish, that empty seat, hate at the table, wins in the political spectrum that are so huge they're almost painful, breaking up with a lover, finding out a child has got something really bad, guilt over your part as a vestry member in letting three people go from the Soup Kitchen staff. Et-cet-era! Easter overthrows all darkness. Christmas is the star of hope. I sure wish someone would hang that up at our place this year.

If I needed any reminders that everyone isn't blessed with the same warm feelings I have about Christmas, I got it, in spades. And that's okay. But of course what my friend is asking for, of course, is for some light to shine in the darkness of all the bleak and damaging pasts that some of us carry around, and some of the discouragement many of us may feel with so much of the present.

For me, Christmas has always been a magical time. My parents, especially my mother, loved Christmas and did it up majorly. Like most big and basically happy families, we had a whole raft of rituals that were observed faithfully, some of which I try to maintain, with a very different kind of family now.

I can't imagine that either of my parents had very happy Christmases growing up. My father's mother was severe and Victorian, a practitioner of plain living and high

thinking, and she had 6 sons who must have been a small army of trouble. I suspect their Christmases were restrained and modest, and consisted of mornings in a Presbyterian Church, which cured my Dad of Christianity forever.

And my mother told stories of her father coming home drunk on Christmas Eve with one present for my grandmother that he had bought at the last minute in the negligee department of Bergdorf's. That doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs

But in our house the Christmas season began right after Thanksgiving. My father only went to church once a year, on Christmas Eve. That was because he and my mother belonged to a group who rang hand bells at the midnight mass on Christmas. The group practiced around our dining room table, and I remember lying in bed and falling asleep to the marvelous ringing of those bells.

The midnight service always seemed enchanted, probably because it was way past my bedtime and there was a dreamlike quality to everything. The church was always crowded and I would often have to sit up in the balcony, where the organ and choir were, and that was special, too.

And then all the excitement of Christmas Day: the stockings, the presents under the tree, the Christmas Dinner, which always included my mother's parents and my Dad's fabulous Aunt Jo, when they were alive, and crazy Uncle Bob, liberated for the day from the V.A. hospital.

I know I'm blanking out some of the hard times and stresses, but on the whole, our habit was to ignore them for the season, and celebrate the holiday and one another.

My parents wanted to give us different experiences from what they'd had as children, and I would say they did a near-perfect job. As my friend wrote in his gloomy email, *Christmas is the star of hope. I sure wish someone would hang that up at our place this year.*

That's what my parents did for us, year in and year out. And I assume that's a reason every one of you is here tonight. Whatever our own experiences of Christmas past, we gather on this night, almost the shortest, darkest night of the year, to view the star of hope, to receive the promise of healing for the world, to hear again the words of good news for all humankind, *peace on earth, goodwill to all.*

That's what God did for us. When God came into the world in the person of the child Jesus, he hung the star of hope for all humanity. Hear that hope tonight, I pray. Receive that healing presence, and carry it out to share with all those you love.

After Dad died, and as Mum kept downsizing in her assisted living facility, she kept with her to the end two ceramic statues I'd given her: one of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and one of the Holy Family on a donkey, escaping on their flight into Egypt. Joseph has a star wired to his head. One of Jesus' feet is broken. I have them now, and keep them on the mantle in my study throughout the year.

They remind me, daily, where I have come from, who I am, what I believe, and why I do what I do. May you all find such blessings on your own Christmas mantle, believe them, and cherish them in your hearts.

Alleluia! Amen