

Christmas 2016
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say...

When I was a child, my understanding of Christmas was shaped by two sets of images. One set of images came from the Gospel stories of the Nativity. They are the images of the child of Bethlehem, born for us.

And there was *another* set of images that shaped the magic of Christmas for me. They were the images of TV specials. Linus, reminding us that Christmas is not about the shape of our Christmas tree. The Grinch, who discovers that "Christmas, perhaps, doesn't come from a store; maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

And then there was Rudolph. The outcast reindeer who couldn't play the reindeer games. But then, on that foggy Christmas Eve, it was the light from his red nose that guided the sleigh the dark. In the gloom of that Christmas night, Santa and the others were just fine, as long as they followed the light that was in front of them...

They were just fine as long as they followed the light that was in front of them.

I am not sure if the original authors of the Rudolph story did it on purpose, but to my mind they created a story which mirrors the deep spiritual truth that Christians celebrate on Christmas day.

What do I mean? Well, in tonight's first reading, the prophet Isaiah says: "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom, a great light has shown."

Isaiah is speaking a word of hope to people who knew that there was a lot of darkness in the world – not just the darkness caused by a lack of sunlight, but the darkness which comes when we suffer. It's the darkness of fear and doubt. Isaiah was speaking to people who were worried about the present, and fearful of the future. They were not sure where to find God.

Some were sick. Some mourned the death of loved ones. Some had been betrayed. Some heard stories about violence. Others worried about spouses, children, friends. There was so much to worry about in the time of Isaiah – *it felt so dark*.

And in my experience, that kind of darkness feels like it will stay around without end.

But, as we heard in tonight's Gospel passage, God does something new, something wonderful. In the darkness of night, in a small town called Bethlehem, in a part of the world that had already experienced the darkness of conflict, a light was born. In the

gloom of that night, love began to shine. In the murky uncertainty of that moment, God's brilliant love took flesh in the child of Mary, and he became, for us, the light of the world.

The birth of that light gave hope to shepherds keeping night watch.
The birth of that child gave the angels a reason to sing.
The arrival of that radiance brightened the lives of Mary and Joseph.
The incarnation of the Word made flesh shatters whatever darkness you and I feel, and we will be fine if we follow the light of Christ.

Now, Christmas could remain just the topic of TV cartoons, unless we do two things tonight. First, we need to name our darkness. And second, we need to make a decision to follow the light.

First, we need to name our darkness. If we don't name our darkness, we might walk around with the misconception that we don't really need a savior. In which case, Jesus was born in Bethlehem for no good reason at all.

If we're not struggling with any darkness, then we don't need any light. If we think we 'have it all together,' if we've convinced ourselves that we never sin, then we don't need to be saved, and we don't need a savior. We don't need Christ, or his Christmas.

But the moment we name our darkness, then we confess that we need a light. The moment we name what is broken, then we can welcome the one who heals us. The moment we confess our sin, we can celebrate the birth of the one who forgives us.

Name the darkness. Name the need. There is plenty of darkness *out there*; the darkness of war and terror. The persecution of Christians. Violence in streets and homes. Poverty and injustice.

There is the darkness of our own sinfulness; the ways in which we have not been faithful to our promises. There's our lack of patience; our unwillingness to make our families and our relationships our first priority; the angers we hold on to, the grudges we nurture; the losses we've experienced; the folks we miss, most of all, this night. When we name those heartbreaks, it can feel very dark indeed.

But that is precisely why the angel appeared to the shepherds *at night* – in the middle of their gloomy darkness. And the very first thing that the angel said was, "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid, because the darkness does not win. Do not be afraid, because the gloom doesn't last forever. Do not be afraid, because God has sent his light into the world, and you will be just fine if you follow the light of Christ.

Follow the light of Christ – that is the decision we have to make this Christmas. Many of us have, perhaps, paid little attention to Jesus's example, his Gospel, in the past year.

Some of us have struggled to put the Gospel into practice. Some wonder if Jesus really meant what he said.

But tonight is not a night for those questions. Tonight is a moment of renewed decision. Will we follow the light of Christ in the year ahead? Or will we keep trying to do things our way, groping through the gloom?

In my experience I usually get lost when I try to walk in the dark without a light to guide my way. Why would we try to walk through life without following the light of Jesus?

St. Paul says in the second reading: “the grace of God has appeared!” The light has come! Follow the light, and you will be fine.

“Then one foggy Christmas eve, Santa came to say, Rudolph with your nose so bright, won’t you guide my sleight tonight?” It was a TV show that taught me that the dark and the gloom can be overcome by the light. But is it the GOSPEL which tells us that life’s darkness does not win, nor do we have to stumble through life lost.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. God became one with us, so that we could follow the light of his love. That is the mystery at the heart of Christmas.

So don’t just *celebrate* that mystery – *live* it! Don’t just *enjoy* Christmas – *become* it! Become a person who knows whatever darkness looms in your life, and become a person who has decided, afresh, to follow the light of Christ.

He loved you enough to be born for you. He loved you enough to die and rise for you. Love him in return, and follow him wherever he leads you.

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