

Living the Light

John 1:1-16

A Christmas Eve Meditation by Peter Ilgenfritz
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Last year on Christmas Eve we were having snow flurries. This year, we have been having a flurry of e-mails all week. It seems that the cow costume for that 5 p.m. Christmas Pageant has gone missing. All week we have been looking for it along with a number of shepherd's crooks. If any of these items show up in the back of your closet, you are encouraged to return them to the church – no questions asked...

It is not the first time that objects from the Christmas Story have gone missing. If you go to Bethlehem today, you will see few things remaining of Luke's and Matthew's stories of this night. You have to go to Rome to see what remains of the manger. To Coatia to see the swaddling clothes of the baby Jesus in Dubrovnik's Cathedral. And to see the gifts of the magi, you need to go to St. Paul Monastery in Mount Athos, Greece and to the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany.

All that remains in Bethlehem is a star inlaid in marble over the exact spot where tradition says Jesus was born - and a wonderful story. A story of how the star the magi followed came down and resides now in the giant stone baptismal font in the Church of the Nativity.

It is easy to laugh at these stories.

Easy to roll your eyes about these relics and say that they are all about gaining attention and notoriety to your cathedral – and the money of the pilgrims who will come to see what treasures you have.

And, if you have been to one of those places and seen people on their knees in front of these relics, or found yourself there, despite yourself, you know that they are about something else as well. They keep the story alive.

There is something this night that we long for, or remember that we once longed for – something that has brought out people in the middle of dark nights to touch, to remember.

The writer of the Gospel of John found it impossible to put in ordinary speech what it is that we long for so he turned to poetry, "The Word became flesh and blood and lived among us...and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1:14,16). As Eugene Peterson puts it, "We live off of his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift."

What is this fullness?

What is the gift of this night?

Is it all just a child's tale that some of us outgrew long ago?

Is there a gift this night for us?

For the past number of years we have taken our middle school youth each summer to work on a house at the Ground Zero Center for Nonviolence – a little tiny center for peace, reconciliation, peace outside a giant military base and home to the Pacific fleet of the Trident nuclear sub. Last summer we started our retreat by going to see “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince”. Toward the end of the movie, the body of a beloved character lies at the feet of a crowd of students – hands over the mouths, tears streaming. Here is the body of one who has led them with care and protected them when he could from terrible things. Now he lies dead here a victim of these violent forces. Overhead swirl dark, menacing clouds, the “Dark Mark”, the very personification of evil itself.

This is it – right here, this place of real life and where life is lived. What do you do? Do you crumble in despair and defeat? Do you raise your fists against the night and seek to lash out at this evil you cannot grasp? This is the place of real life. The place where some of us are tonight. What do you do?

A teacher in the school, Professor McGonagall, has a wand in her hand. She raises her arm and as the wand rises it is lit as with fire. One by the one, the students follow her lead and soon in this great cavern of dark, there is the burning bright light as of hundreds of candles.

What is that? Hope. It is presence. It is some kind of new strength and power. In that space between despair and rage, neither denying the grief nor standing impotent against the dark. It is that thing beyond words – something beautiful, something true. That “love that is stronger than death” (See Romans 8:31-39), that “Light that shines in the dark that the darkness cannot overcome”. (See John 1:1-3)

This is not just the stuff of children’s stories. In South Africa, prior to the abolition of apartheid, when the white minority ruled brutally over the black majority, people used to light candles and place them in their windows as a sign of hope and faith – a sign that one day injustice would be overcome. At one point the authorities began to crack down on this. It became as illegal to have a lit candle in the window as it was to own a gun.

The irony of this was not missed on children. They had a joke – “the government is afraid of candles!”

“Eventually, we know that apartheid was overcome. Reflecting upon the forces that helped to overthrow it, it is fairly evident that candles were more powerful than guns and armies. Hope is more powerful than any army”. (Ron Rolheiser)

Ask me why I am a Christian and I will tell you this – it is because of this whole sweep of a story, the story that begins tonight. God is with here. God is with us. A story that gives me the strength, the hope, the faith to raise my arm and lift a candle again and again in the dark nights of my life and our world.

It is the promise that justice, peace, love, harmony, gentleness, graciousness will have the final word.

Tonight, will you say yes to this Way of the one born under the stars of a night like this?

Will you be Christ's light on this dark night?