

SERMON- Christmas Eve (B)

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Isaiah 9:2-7

nTitus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

December 24, 2023

Psalms 96

OPENING:

It was the best of times

It was the worst of times.

It was the best of times: a baby was on his way, and the family was going to be together for Christmas.

It was the worst of times: the reason they were together was taxes, and the mother-to-be had to travel to her in-laws during the pregnancy.

It was the best of times.

It was the worst of times.

It happened *in time* though.

This story that we have heard from Luke it did not happen in a “galaxy far far away” and it did not happen “once upon a time.”

It happened *at a particular time*, scholars can argue endlessly whether it happened at 0, or at 4 BC or at 4 AD, but it happened *in time*, and that time was the best of times, and it was the worst of times.

So kind of like now.

At *this* time

and at all times.

DUALITY

Christmas can be a sentimental time because it is centered on a baby, and that's okay.

We want to only talk about the ‘best of times’...

But always there on the horizon of this miraculous child's birth is that it's happening in an unsanitary manger, in trying circumstances.

It's happening in the dark (‘the worst of times.’)

That juxtaposition, that tension, that reality, it's here on this night.¹
There are many ways to explain it, and many things that can be said about Christmas but this one gets to the point rather succinctly:
“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”²
(from the Gospel of John)

If you look past the fluorescent-lit brightness of our attempts to have only the bright sweetness and glare of the season, if you look deep into the manger, that's what's revealed, a light that defies the darkness.

John's Gospel indeed says it best,
or maybe the Gospel of Joni Mitchell and her song “The River” says it best.

HYMNS

Preachers/clergy: we get a little antsy on Christmas Eve, Easter, because we know that we are only the 5th or 6th most important thing going on.

You have the music and you have the church decorations, you have family, and the goose at home cooked to perfect. Somewhere down the line is the preacher talk quoting “Tale of Two Cities.”

I will cede that point. I will gladly give it up to Todd.

The hymns that we sing tonight and every Christmas also say it best:
that the gloomy darkness so named and recognized sheds light on God's plan of salvation. In the title themselves:

“It came upon a midnight clear.”

“In the bleak midwinter”

These hymns reveal the dense theological truth: that God comes into the darkness, into the emptiness, into the loneliness of our hearts and souls and gives us hope.

There is a whole genre of “Sad Christmas” songs that provide so much solace and comfort and joy.

“What Child is this”

“The First Noel”

Notice we have already sung “O Come All ye Faithful”

and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”

and we will close with “Joy to the World”

¹ This sermon is heavily informed by the following: [The Brothers Zahl Episode 13: Christmas \(fireside.fm\)](#) and Sarah Condon's [Put the Sad Back in Christmas - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](#).

² John 1.5

because... It was the best of times

These are rousing, triumphant, proclamations of the new-born king.

But notice during Communion, now that we have set you up with those, we are going to knock you down with:

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Silent Night.”

Neither of these, to be sure, state explicitly: “It was the worst of times” but they do speak honestly to the human condition about life’s difficulties and travails.

They get to the tension, the juxtaposition, this Dickensian, human reality, called “life.”

I cannot really explain with words the intense beauty of “Sad Christmas.”

It really only can be explained by, after we have shared communion, by turning off the lights in the sanctuary here and giving everyone a candle to be lit...

to illuminate the darkness of this world,

to create shadows that reveal the love that God has for us,

These wisps outline the love we have for one another on a dark and Silent Night that is also bright and bursting with light.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way: “Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”³

SECULAR

Now there are also, thankfully, examples from the secular world that demonstrate how dark and light work together. Think about it:

Christmas lights look the best, during the night, otherwise they look a little bit... tacky in your subdivision.

Christmas Trees also look the best at night, otherwise they can be a little bit sad in the daytime.

And, if I have learned anything from the Hallmark Channel, Christmas romance is best discovered at night.

Barbara Brown Taylor explains it this way, talking about the dark and light:

“There is so much more visual information available to most of us than we really want to see

that we close our eyes to think, to kiss, or to listen.”⁴

³ Brown Taylor, Barbara. 2015. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: HarperCollins. 129

⁴ Brown Taylor, Barbara. 2015. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: HarperCollins 92.

Our churches too are the most beautiful at night.

It's amazing we don't do this more often!

Let the darkness settle around us just to know that the light will pierce, to demonstrate the truth that the worst of times exist but we are able to survive them with God's help.

CONCLUSION

Listen to the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem":

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight*

Hopes and fears of all the years:

Do you have any hopes and fears? Give them to God for this Christmas as a gift, light and dark, good and bad, and watch God take them and make them holy.

AMEN