

## **CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLELIGHT SERVICE DEC. 24, 2010**

### **CYCLE "A"**

**TITLE: FROM DARKNESS TO ETERNAL LIGHT.**

**READINGS: Luke 1:26-35, Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-20**

Our first Holy Night, Night Divine, began in darkness. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Matthew 4:16 quotes from Isaiah chapter 9, to give the Israelites freedom from the darkness of their oppression and defeat. That first Christmas night truly was dark for God's people who felt nothing less than a violent uprising, a military Messiah, could save them from the slavery of their Roman masters. On that first Christmas the mood was despair and resignation.

Is it any less dark in our own world today? We are so enlightened these days. We have advanced in so many areas. In science, medicine and technology, the world is moving at breakneck speed. It's so hard to keep up with everything. Today we are so enlightened by the self-indulgences of our modern day that we find it difficult to impossible to let the true light of faith centered in Jesus into our lives. But there is such darkness still! There are wars and rumors of wars, hunger and much unemployment, racism, loneliness, depression, despair, and a sense of emptiness. Perhaps the poet Robert Frost worded it best when he wrote: "I have been acquainted with the night. I have walked in the rain. I have been acquainted with the night." If you haven't been touched by darkness in some form in your life as yet, you will be. All of us will be acquainted with the night. I am not here tonight, Christmas Eve 2010, to deny the existence of darkness. Nowhere in Scripture are we assured that things just aren't as bad as they seem. Rather God's Word makes it clear that darkness is real and it is present in our lives.

But God's precious Word also assures us that a light has dawned in the midst of the darkness and the darkness was not able to overcome it. We need to follow the light of the star to Bethlehem and see the eternal flame in the Christ child named Jesus, Emmanuel, our God with us. Here we stand on this holy night so puffed up with ourselves, our toys, our possessions that we do not recognize that God, who is the source of everything in this universe, humbled himself and quietly, unpretentiously came into our world in that innocent helpless child.

The good news for us this Christmas is that in the midst of today's darkness that divine light still shines and our modern day darkness is still unable to overcome it. "I am the light of the world," says Jesus, "whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Jn.8:12. Do you believe that? If you believe the Word of God you do. I presume you do since you are here. Then I would urge you to live it. Make that flicker of faith in your life an intense flame. Begin anew to live what you believe. Put half as much energy into your faith and its expression in your lives as you do your worldly comforts and possessions, and he who is the eternal light will bless you abundantly with eternal rewards. Enlighten yourselves with the true light of God! Be open to God's invitation. For in the midst of our darkened world that light comes to us in the most unlikely places and at the most inopportune times.

A young mother of a family who went to a restaurant one evening recounts for us an encounter which was very awkward but very beautiful and meaningful: We were the only family with children in the restaurant, she says, I sat my infant son Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, "Hi there." He pounded his fat baby hands on the highchair tray. His eyes were wide with excitement and his mouth was bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with merriment. I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man with a tattered rag of a coat: dirty, greasy and worn. His pants were baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers were too short to be called a beard and his nose was so varicose it looked like a road map. We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled. His hands waved and flapped on loose wrists. "Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster," the man said to Erik. My husband and I exchanged looks, "What do we do?" Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hi, hi there."

Everyone in the restaurant noticed and looked at us and then at the man. The old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby. Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room, "Do ya know patty cake? Do ya know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo." Nobody thought the old man was cute. He was obviously drunk. My husband and I were embarrassed. We ate in silence; all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring skid-row bum, who in turn, reciprocated with his cute comments. We finally got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. "Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," I prayed. As I

drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to shield Erik, but Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position.

Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man's. Suddenly a very old smelly man and a very young baby met in a beautiful relationship. Erik, in an act of total trust, love, and submission laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor- gently so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time. I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, "You take care of this baby." Somehow I managed, "I will," from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest – unwilling, longingly, as though he were in pain. I received my baby, and the man said, "God bless you, ma'am, you've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than a muttered thanks. With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car.

My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why I was saying, "My God, my God, forgive me." I had just witnessed complete and unconditional love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment; a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw a suit of clothes. I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt it was God asking, "Are you willing to share your son for a moment?" I have shared mine for all eternity. The ragged old man, unwittingly, had reminded me, "To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must become as little children."

Our God who humbled himself and came to us as a helpless child in a manger, acknowledged by a group of lowly shepherds, is the eternal light which conquers our darkness. Enlighten us, O God; let us cling to that divine child in our hearts. **Amen.**

**Pastor Barney**