

Celebrating in the Light of Christ

Scripture tells us that the very first words ever spoken were the Creator's command, "let there be light." At that moment, when everything that was and is and ever will be was nothing more than an idea in the mind of our God, Adonai began to bring that infinitely complex and beautiful idea into being by turning on the lights. God has been bringing light out of the darkness ever since.

Jesus was born at a time when, to quote our passage from Isaiah, the people "walked in darkness" and "lived in a land of deep darkness." Their Roman overlords didn't see it that way, though. When Caesar Augustus ascended as the first Roman Emperor in 27 B.C., he imposed the *Pax Romana*, or "Roman Peace," across what was then the civilized world. Many Romans celebrated the *Pax Romana* as a golden age of arts, literature and technology. During the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Empire doubled in size, stretching from Great Britain to North Africa and governing as much as a quarter of the world's population. If you were wealthy and well-connected, it was a great time to be a citizen of Rome.

The Roman Empire didn't grow because independent nations were eagerly lining up to join, however. Rome extended its empire by bloody conquest, brutally suppressing revolts in its provinces, including Judea. Herod the so-called "Great" and his son, Herod Antipas, were both Roman appointees who ruled at the pleasure of Caesar Augustus. Rome maintained a posture of tolerance toward Jewish religious practices, but that tolerance would disappear in an instant if Roman authority was challenged. The priests who served in the Temple in Jerusalem were forced to function as liaisons between their Roman oppressors and the Jewish people. Yes, there was corruption in the Temple leadership but, even if there hadn't been, the Temple authorities had little choice but to cooperate with Rome if they wanted their people to survive.

It was into that atmosphere of oppression and fear that a very special little boy was born. Luke's Gospel tells us that Caesar Augustus had declared that "all the world should be registered ... in their own towns" for taxation and possible military service. Joseph, the baby's father, was descended from the House of David. So he and his pregnant fiancée, Mary, made the 80-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, the shepherd boy who became Israel's most exalted king. That rustic little village, five miles south of Jerusalem, must have been crammed with travelers. Whether the inn was completely full or, as translators now believe, Joseph's cousins ran out of guestrooms, Joseph and Mary ended up sleeping in a stable. There, Mary gave birth to her son, Jesus. The stable would have been in a cave behind the building, so Jesus was likely born in the shadows even if he drew his first breath at high noon.

Darkness enshrouded the people we see next: shepherds, the unclean pariahs of Biblical society. Their lowly status wasn't their fault. Working outdoors with herd animals made it impossible for shepherds to satisfy the strict Judaic purity laws. Like our trash collectors and migrant farm workers, Biblical shepherds did essential work that benefitted their community and were stigmatized just the same. So there they are, out in the cold and dark, guarding their flocks from thieves and predators when all Heaven suddenly breaks loose. An angel, gleaming with the glory of God, pops in out of nowhere and scares them out of their wits. But the angel brings wondrous news to these social outcasts, news intended not just for the wealthy and powerful, but for everyone. The Messiah has been born, and the shepherds can find him lying, of all places, in a feed trough in town. And as if the brilliant glow from the angel wasn't enough, a multitude of the heavenly hosts suddenly bursts into view, praising God's glory and promising peace to the people. The divine light must have been absolutely dazzling.

Modern historians have various theories about when Jesus was actually born, but it's no coincidence that we celebrate his birthday in the darkest season of the year. Citizens of the 21st Century are no strangers to darkness. Our hardships are different than those faced by the Hebrew people under the false peace of Roman occupation. But we know what it is to live in a world where the rich still take too much from the poor, where discrimination prevents too many from achieving their dreams, where pandemics and recessions and political divisions and environmental degradation and rumors of wars trouble our souls. Too many of us fall victim to addiction, anxiety, depression, and despair. Life is an extraordinary gift from our loving Creator, but living through it can be very, very difficult. Like the Hebrew people of Jesus's day, we need the light that only Heaven can provide.

The birth of the Messiah was heralded by divine light, tearing through the darkness to offer joy and hope to a suffering world. Jesus wasn't born in a splendid palace to wealthy parents. He came to a peasant couple who had been forced by circumstances to bed down in a barn. The first witnesses to his birth weren't the splendid kings of the Epiphany, but hard-working herders who were considered unfit to mingle with respectable people. The Son of God could have entered the world wherever he liked. He chose to come where he was most needed, where his divine light could drive away the deepest darkness and assure the poor, the oppressed, and the heavy laden of God's mercy and enduring love.

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus brought life into the world, and "the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." That divine light of God is with us still. As we gather to celebrate the birth of our Messiah, we can be confident that the light of Heaven, the light that chased away the shadows in a dimly-lit stable, that illuminated the faces of frightened shepherds and danced across the fields outside of

Bethlehem remains with us, to lift our hearts and enliven our souls. Even when worldly circumstances or personal hardships threaten to suffocate us in shadow, the light of Christ never abandons us. Jesus has been human. He knows how much we need the light of God, and he is always ready to provide it.

It's especially fitting that we celebrate Christmas Eve after the sun has set. The candles on our altar and Advent wreath burn more brightly in the evening. They symbolize the light of God, the light that gleamed at the beginning of Creation, that shone from a stable in Bethlehem, that blazed in the fields outside that modest little town. And they remind us that, no matter how deep the darkness seemingly gets, it can never overcome the light. Storms always end, the sun always rises even after the longest nights, and the love of God is always with us, shining like a beacon to guide and comfort us when our own strength or courage falters.

Jesus is known to us by many names: the Word of God, the Son of Man, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace. Tonight, we celebrate him as the Light of the World, the one who came to rescue us from the darkness and deliver us into the light. Before our service ends, we will pass the candle flame from hand to hand and go out into the world with our hearts ablaze. God said, "let there be light," and there is light, now and forever. Merry Christmas, dear friends, and *amen*.