



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Light

### **Sermon for Christmas Eve, second service, 2016**

*Readings:* Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; Psalm 96

*Sermon text:* The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined. Isaiah 9:2

We are a few days past the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. Wednesday had only nine hours of daylight. But for the next few months we will be adding a minute or two each day. Daylight is on its way back. Hooray.

In the meantime, it is dusk at four when I take Zoe for her afternoon walk on the streets of Millbrook. We make a good surveillance team. She keeps her attention close to the ground and is especially alert to the signs and sightings of dogs and children. I focus on the brave show of Christmas trees and houses lit up with strings of light and Advent candles in the window. Down at the bottom of the Franklin Avenue there is a creche displaying the old story of a child in the manger, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wise kings, with a star shining overhead. The stores are open and busy with people buying gifts for the season. The eight candles of Chanukah menorah across the street from Grace, sign of the perennial struggle for religious freedom, will soon be lit. I am grateful for lights in the darkness.

Hold to your faith as to a lamp shining in a dark place, we read in the second letter of St Peter. Hold on to the light until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart (2 Peter 1:19).

Beloved friends, no matter how dark the times, hold on to the light of Christ, the core principles of our Christian faith, the experiences and intimations we have had of God's abundant grace, the hope in the promise of peace and justice on earth, the practice of self-giving love and compassionate care for the poor, the stranger, the weak and the hungry. Hold on, for the day will dawn and the morning star, the Christ star, rise again in your heart.

But holding on to the heart of our faith in Christ is different than clinging to nostalgia, longing for a return to an imagined or remembered golden age when we were young and the world was good.

Not that I am immune or opposed to all nostalgia. Here we are, after all, in a Christmas Eve service, amidst carols and creches, in a season of pageants and Christmas Day presents, that is designed to make warm memories for children and remind adults of their youth. Only Scrooge can say “Bah, humbug!” And he learns his lesson in the end from tiny Tim (remember him?). God bless us, every one.

But there is also a toxic kind of nostalgia that traps us in the past and distorts our hopes and plans for the future. Yural Levin, a conservative commentator has written that both left and right are engaging in a national politics of nostalgia, though with different periods and recommendations for recovering America’s greatness and power, prosperity and equality. We see in the Middle East a longing for the return of imperial *caliphate* and in the West we hear rumblings of a revived *Christendom*. This results in a Islamist ideology see the West as crusader enemy to be attacked whenever possible and wherever vulnerable with whatever vicious means at hands, as we witnessed tragically in the Christmas market assault last week. And we witness in our country and Europe a populist and nativist reaction against the dramatic changes in demographics, dislocation of labor by globalization and automation, increasing inequality in wealth, and the cultural changes demanded, justly, by women, people of color, and LGBT folks.

Heads are spinning and hearts are torn. How do we achieve homeland security, civil politics and cultural harmony in a time of such rapid and confusing change? Let alone “Peace on earth among all people.” How can we hear this angelic proclamation as even a distant aspiration?

We live in a period of structural transformation, not unlike that of the Reformation and Renaissance five hundred years ago. We are sailing in uncharted waters. Longing for yesterday will not answer the challenges of today and tomorrow. Therefore we need to rely on—or recover—core principles, faith as trust in God, and walk in the Way of Jesus one step at a time. Working with love and hope and faith, we can add a minute or two of light to these dark days until we reach the dawn.

It is good to remember, in this dusky time of uncertain paths, that the most profound cultural and religious change in human history started out on this night, when a child was born in Palestine over two thousand years ago. His mother was unmarried at the time, the man who became his father by adoption was a carpenter, he was born in a stable among animals because there was other shelter in Bethlehem, then the family was forced to flee as to Egypt as political refugees because the tyrant King Herod thought the child a threat.

If this seems an inauspicious start for the one we proclaim as God incarnate, the Word made flesh, well, then perhaps we need to reflect on how God reveals through this story a pattern of the way God works in the world. The difficult circumstances of Jesus’ birth suggest that God’s deliverance of peace and good will among the people on earth will not come easily, as if it were an order from on high. It will come from below, from the humble, poor, and working people, not of great power but of great faith, sometimes driven by the larger state actors to seek refuge in other towns and countries, sometimes acting as the good Samaritans who reach out to those in need.

Peace will come from an expanding sense of kinship and friendship, good will, with the recognition that there is no one chosen people but the light has been given for all people, to be spread as a candle light’s flame can spread, from one candle to many, until the whole world is lit.

Revived Christianity will come from those who recognize the deep meaning of the Incarnation. God became human as an exchange of gifts and experience. God assumed the suffering of humanity and experienced the cross of death so that we can share the joy of God and participate in God's eternal life. It follows that we must do the same: take on the suffering and struggle for justice and peace, while sharing the joy of God and the love of Christ.

In this way, God works to bring heaven and earth together. Through Mary saying, let it be according to your word—and bearing the Christ child. Through Joseph responding to the dreams of God to protect this mother and child. Through the life of this defenseless babe who grew up to show us the Way, a Way stronger than violence and death. Through the response of each person of faith and good will, working for justice and peace in a dark time, in a changing and difficult world.

This is how the healing of the world happens. Through one person who calls the many. Through the Holy Spirit which helps us believe and challenges us to follow. Through lives of sharing and participation in community and divinity. Through faith and acts of love. Through taking in the refugee and feeding the hungry. Through speaking up for truth no matter the cost. For resisting the tyrant—who achieve peace through the blood of others—with the way of non-violence and *satyagraha* (Gandhi's word), the force of truth, which achieves peace through willingly laying one's own life on the line.

This is the way and the power of God as revealed in the Incarnation of Christ. It is not nostalgia for a better yesterday. It is hope for a better tomorrow. It is hope for that great day when all people can join with Isaiah and say: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined."

Keep the lamp burning, or kindle it anew, on this most holy night of our Lord and Savior's birth.

In Christ's name. Amen.

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Grace Church, Millbrook, NY