

Christmas Eve Meditation
December 24th, 2019
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Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Everyone who has ever sat through a performance of the *Messiah* knows what’s next: *“For unto us a child is born . . .”* Handel’s exuberant chorus is probably playing in your mind right now: *“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace . . .”* Isaiah’s royal birth announcement, *bright* with possibility and expectation, is the *centerpiece* of the Old Testament lesson for Christmas Eve.

Which reminds me of something else I associate with Christmas Eve.

In Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge declares war on Christmas: *“Out upon Merry Christmas! What’s Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer. . . . Every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.”*

I first saw *A Christmas Carol* in middle-school, at a local College production. I still recall sitting *bolt upright* in my seat when I heard Jacob Marley’s ghost *moaning* and *thumping* up the stairs with *clanging* chains and money boxes dragging along behind him. I loved Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, of course, and the way the play ended, with Scrooge *transformed* and *redeemed*.

Charles Dickens, I think, was close to the mark. The *gospel*, you see, is about the *power of love* to *change*, *redeem* and *save* and to make a difference in the lives of men and women. A generation after Jesus’ death and resurrection, one of his followers wrote, *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. . . . God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”* What a remarkable notion!

Every civilization and culture has pondered *ultimate* questions. For example, early philosophers concluded that if there is an ultimate being, it must be *perfect*, *complete* and *lacking* nothing. Such a god would have *no* needs and *no*

feelings or emotions. The Greeks called this the *apatheia* of God, from which we derive the word *apathy*. God, they insisted, must be *untouched* and *uncontaminated* by the *messy* neediness of humanity.

But the *gospel* proclaims the exact opposite: God *does* have feelings and is hopelessly and relentlessly in love with the world and human beings. God lives *not* in textbooks or creeds, not in temples, cathedrals and churches, but *in* acts of human love.

In *Encountering God*, Diana Eck says that “the language of **faith** is the language of **affection** . . . Faith language is analogous to the language we use when we say, ‘I love you.’”

Love words like these:

God so *loves* the world as to become part of it, *enfleshed* in humanness, *blessing* the world and everything in it by coming to *live* in it and *redeem* it. *Incarnation* is at least in part an *affirmation* about the world, its *sacredness*, its *importance* to God and the *blessedness* of the human life that God came into.

The miracle of love, you see, is that the *more* you love, the more *alive* you are. Fortunate people have learned *how* to love, *how* to give love, resources, gifts and life itself.

At its simplest and best, Christmas *is*, for the *young*, the excitement of gifts received; for *those older*, it is a yearly reminder that it is *not only* better to give than to receive, but a lot more *joyful* as well. It’s why we *give* gifts, *send* greeting cards and *pen* long, heartfelt Christmas letters. It’s *why* we’re kinder and more generous than usual and *shower* neighbors and friends with cookies and jars of homemade jam. It’s a *reminder* of what it means to be fully alive *and*, in a small way, an *instrument* of God’s *life-transforming* love.

And it’s *never* too late. After a harrowing, sleepless night, Scrooge becomes a *changed* man. He *sends* the biggest turkey in the neighborhood shop to the Cratchit home. He *wishes* his startled neighbors and shopkeepers a Merry Christmas. He *even* goes to church.

On the book's last page, Dickens writes of Scrooge: "*His own heart **laughed** . . . and it was always said of him, that he knew **how** to keep Christmas well.*"

Friends, *keeping Christmas well* is *believing* in the *transforming power of love*. Wendell Berry must have had that power in mind when he wrote: "*I know that I have life / only insofar as I have love. / I have no love / except it come from Thee. / Help me, please, to carry / this candle against the wind.*"

Let us pray:

Give us, O God, such *love* and *wonder* that with shepherds and magi, and pilgrims unknown, we may come to *adore* the holy child, the promised king; and with our gifts *worship* him, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Amen.