

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

'The Hopes and Fears of All the Years'

In 1865, Philip Brooks, an Anglican priest from Philadelphia, visited Bethlehem. The experience left a profound impression on him, and out of it he wrote the carol we have just sung:

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

Tonight, we have come — through the streets, in the dark — for the same reason. Something in us knows that our hopes and our fears are gathered up in Christ this night. We come carrying them all into the presence of the everlasting light.

Many centuries earlier, a prophet wrote:

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.

We know what it is to walk in darkness.
Perhaps it's the darkness of grief and loss, of pain and hurt.
The darkness that comes with separation, or illness.
Or perhaps the dying of a long-held dream —
the ending of something we cherished.
Whatever form it takes, the darkness speaks of our fears and sorrows.

And yet, we also know what it is to see a light:
the light of practical help offered in time of need.
The light of loving care.
The light of a friend who walks beside us, sharing our journey.
The light of hope spoken into despair.
The light of courage and sacrifice
shown by those who look beyond themselves.

These small lights — these personal, human glimmers —
point us to a greater light.

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

They meet in the birth of a child — in a manger, among shepherds.
They meet in this night as we celebrate the brightest light of all.
Here Christ meets us as we truly are.
The gift of his birth is the gift of God — God with us —
sharing our joys and our sorrows,
our hopes and our fears.

In the story we celebrate this night, there is both squalor and splendour.
There is the roughness of a stable, the smell of animals,
and the glory of angels singing in the highest heaven.
There is the violence of a brutal empire,
and yet the peace proclaimed to shepherds.
There are those shepherds — men treated as nobodies —
and a newborn child named:
“Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Perhaps this is why we return to the story every year:
because it's *our* story, interwoven with *God's* story.
And when these two stories meet, love is found —
a love and a light that embraces all:
for the ordinary and the overlooked,
for the downcast and the joyful,
for the fearful and the hopeful,
for you and for me.
God's love meets us tonight.
A light shines, and love becomes tangible —
not far above us, but here, in the midst of our lives:
in moments when our hearts overflow with joy and delight,
and in moments when they break with sorrow and pain.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.

Christmas isn't an escape from reality.
It doesn't deny the grief, the pain, the unanswered questions.
Rather, it declares that in the very midst of these,
God comes to us — quietly, humbly —
in a child laid in a manger.

The joy of this night is not the joy of forgetting our struggles,
but the joy of knowing that God steps into them with us.
God transforms our darkness not by removing it,
but by shining an everlasting light within it.
And that light is not only for us to receive —
it is for us to carry and share.

We are called to bring it into places where shadows linger:
to make God's love visible in acts of kindness,
in our words that heal,
in our deeds of peace,
in our willingness to stand beside the hurting,
in our compassion that brings light into the darkness.

This is our hope.
This is our celebration: God with us.

God dwelling among us.
God entering our lives, even now.

Christ meets us tonight —
but not tonight only.
Christ meets all who seek light in darkness,
all who long for hope,
all who dare to believe that love can be born again.

Tonight, we rejoice,
for the goodness and kindness of God has appeared,
offering new life.

This is the good news of great joy for all people:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David
a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”

Gracious God,
on this holy night,
we give thanks for the light that shines in our darkness,
for the child who brings hope and peace to a weary world.
Gather our hopes and fears into your love,
and send us out as bearers of that light —
to speak words of kindness,
to live with compassion,
and to share the joy and love of Christ with all.

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