

Sermon on Christmas Eve at Midnight Mass 2024

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Isaiah 9. 2-7 & John 1. 1-14

Light Returns

I wonder, what's your earliest Christmas memory?

I imagine some of those memories will bring a smile to our faces and others perhaps a tear to our eyes.

My earliest memory is of my older brother waking me up in the pitch darkness of the small hours of Christmas morning, aged six or seven, and us sneaking down the very creaky wooden stairs at home to see if Santa had judged us worthy of all the toys we'd carefully listed in our letters to the North Pole. I can still feel that anticipation of creeping through the darkness, turning on the living room light and there on two separate armchairs, presents!

It's no coincidence that Christmas is celebrated in this the darkest month of the year. Cold dark winters can be fairly miserable, so the anticipation, the wonder, the feasting and the gifts, these are all so important in lifting our spirits. They bring a measure of comfort and joy.

There are things, of course, that can only be seen and appreciated in the dark, like candlelight or Christmas lights, like starlight.

Last Saturday was the shortest day and the longest night of the year, and each year it comes with a promise; a promise that the next day will be brighter, and the next day brighter still. The winter solstice is a reminder that when the darkness is greatest is also the moment when the light is about to return. It's around this moment that Christians celebrate what they believe to be the dawning of the true Light of the world.

On this holiest of nights, in the holiness of our togetherness, we've gathered to affirm the truth that the moment darkness is greatest is the exact moment light is about to return. In these dark days, we are here to affirm our belief in the Light that never goes out; in Immanuel, God with us; God for us. And tonight, we stand united by a belief in that defiant hope.

We stand together in resistance to the darkness, to place our hopes and our fears of this particular year into the safekeeping of our Christ-like God.

Hope knows that in the end it will be OK, because if it's not, then it's not the end. Hope stubbornly refuses to give in to the darkness. Hope is the ability, in fact, to hear the song of the future. Hope chooses to believe that, in the end, light is always stronger than darkness.

The story of the first Christmas touches, I think, something very deep within us. There's something hope-full about the birth of a child against all the odds of poverty and piety. And this Christ child of Christmas can make a world feel new. Something so vulnerable and so perfect and so innocent calls forth all that's protective within us and makes us want to believe in better.

So tonight, we hold to a hope that never fails or expires; that same hope that a new mother and father saw in the birth of their child. Tonight, we hold to the same hope that undervalued shift-working shepherds heard in the songs of angels.

Tonight, we hold to that crazy hope of Immanuel; of a God who took flesh and was born one of us, and who this night sits beside us and promises to walk with us into this Christmas day and through each different joy and challenge, into every possible darkness.

During this time of Advent, we've been lighting a new candle each week, watching as the light slowly increases. I want to end with a poem by a guy called John Roedel, someone who has known the deep darkness of depression. This is what Advent means to him:

I experience the five weeks of advent each and every night.

As I lay in bed at night watching shadows crawl, my heart becomes a living advent wreath with four burning violet candles woven through the brambles at the edge of my heart and a single white candle standing tall in the centre.

As the night moves in, each candle lights.

FIRST a lit candle for the hope that I can be remade again.

SECOND a burning candle for the true peace that I am ready to be swaddled in.

THIRD a candle igniting for the joy for living life with passion that I can't wait to rediscover.

and FOURTH a candle of glowing love that reminds me that darkness never wins.

Like a child waiting to unwrap presents, I'm craving to unwrap the dawn.

I know the sun is coming; it always does, but that doesn't make it any less spectacular when it finally crawls up over the horizon.

That's when the FIFTH Advent candle in my heart catches fire.

Hallelujah! The sun is here!

And that sunrise means that the wait is over; my redemption has come to wash me in fresh light.

But it never lasts long. By nightfall I am once again covered in the soundless darkness that I have collected during the day.

But that doesn't last long either because every night is Advent for someone like me.

Hope is never far away when you are just a couple of held breaths away from being saved by the sunrise.

Each night the candles in my heart relight.

One hope, one peace, one joy, one love.

And then... new LIGHT,

and then... new LIFE.

And, in a few moments when the clock welcomes this new Christmas Day, we'll light that long-awaited Christ candle, and, as we do, it can be a wish or a prayer, for whatever hope or peace or joy or love you or others dear to you need on this holiest of nights.