

Christ is our Light – Defying the Darkness

The theologian John Shea remembers when he was a boy driving around the neighborhood at night at Christmas time with his family to “see the lights” – the strings a brilliant flashing lights and Christmas figures people would put up on their houses in their yards.

But the Shea house – a small house in which his grandparents lived on the first floor and John his parents and sisters lived upstairs – had no lights: the grandparents flat was dark (they were usually in bed by nine!) The only light emanating from the house was the Shea’s Christmas tree from the second floor window: no bulbs blinking on and off, no glitz and no “Oh Wow!” Just a steady, soft, simple light shining – contrasting – against the dark December night.

But as he got older, he discovered the lesson of his family’s simple tree; John Shea writes:

Christmas celebrates an inner light, a tree of lights inside the house of our being, Christmas invites us to come closer and ponder the beauty. We notice this light because it is contrasted with an outer darkness. Although the outer darkness does not go away, the inner light defies this darkness, refusing to allow it to dictate the terms of existence... No matter how severe the darkness of the outer world is, it cannot overcome this inner and transcendent light, rooted in a transcendent love, more powerful than all the darkness.

Sisters and brothers, Christmas celebrate that Jesus: *God-with-us* – *Emmanuel* is the Light... the Light that penetrates the darkness! Jesus: the Light – the spark of God birthing within us and among us – defying the darkness and inviting us to *embrace* the Light... *become* the Light and to bring that Light to others; to bring that Light to a world that in so many ways continues to struggle in darkness. Sisters and brothers, *this* is Christmas in a nutshell...

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We all know the darkness: we all have experienced the dark nights of our soul. Some of us gathered here this Christmas are experiencing this darkness: I pointed out some examples at our Advent Penance:

- ❖ Those who are experiencing their first Christmas after the death of someone they dearly love...
- ❖ Those who come to Christmas knowing that cancer or some other disease has invaded their own flesh...
- ❖ Those who came to this country – some actually here with us here – desperate to find a new life and now living in fear that everything might be lost...

- ❖ Those who want to live in the light and freedom of Christ but are still held captive by addiction...
- ❖ Those who try to spread holiday cheer and comfort, all while returning to homes where discord and distrust hold reign...
- ❖ Those who are growing up different than others, in families and communities where young people are expected to mature in well-worn ways...
- ❖ Those who are alienated their families and friends this Christmas, cut off from the faces meant to give them life...
- ❖ Those who think they are alone, struggling with unbelief and with questions about their faith...
- ❖ Those who are not here this Christmas, or in any church most Sundays, because it has never been a place of comfort and safety for them...

... and the list goes on... ..

Sisters and brothers, let us lift up those among us here this evening and those in our lives that are experiencing the darkness – let our Light shine into their hearts on this Christmas Day! That’s what a parish – a Christian Community – what love – is all about: Letting our Light shine to comfort one another and especially those experiencing darkness. Let us spend a few moments in quiet meditation holding those experiencing pain and darkness in prayer and in the knowledge that ultimately – in the Light of Christ – all will be well...

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Sisters and brothers, the Light of Christ – Light for our souls, our hearts, our families and relationships... is also Light for the world and for our nation: a world, a nation in so many ways experiencing such darkness on this Christmas 2017. We all know the list: polarization and division, the top getting richer (especially in the last couple of days) while the poor are ignored; inflammatory rhetoric feeding the flames of racism and white supremacy and nationalism; patriarchy – male-privilege and misogyny – at the cultural heart of issues of sexism, sexual abuse and homophobia; global injustice and terrorism, war and violence... .., and the list goes on.

But Christmas is a proclamation that ultimately Light will overcome darkness! That ultimately justice will reign, that ultimately *love is stronger than hate* and that, ultimately, the dream of God for the world: a world where we respect each person as a child of God, a world where we respect each person as a brother or sister *will come to be ... will defy the darkness!*

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Last Christmas I concluded my Homily by inviting us – as we moved into a new year – to recommit ourselves to the vision of Jesus ... to a creed not so much of *doctrine*... but of *practice*. One of our commitments was to an invitation to support the refugees, immigrants, and undocumented so demonized in the election cycle last year. We did... little knowing at that time, that our commitment would lead us – joining with other communities of Light: St. Lucy's, University United Methodist and Plymouth Churches – to declare ourselves a Sanctuary Parish on Pentecost! Imagine where the Spirit may lead us this year – as we follow the Light of the World that defies the darkness!

It seems right that we once again recommit ourselves to the vision of Jesus - - - as contrasted to the darkness of our time; to once again look at our world with 'the Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other.' As I reviewed our "Creed of Practice" from last year, it struck me that in many ways the world seems darker this Christmas the last...

Yet, on this Christmas, in the midst of any darkness, there remain some non-negotiables that put the vision of Jesus into the here and now for us as Catholic Christians. And, these are not Democrat values or Republican values, left values or right values, progressive or conservative values, but Gospel values that lead us to put our Creed, our *orthodoxy*, into *orthopraxis*.

And so on this Christmas 2017, in the midst of the polarization and fear in our nation, I ask that we consider the following and if we so choose, to respond: "I will" or "I do."

To listening. Many Americans seem incapable of listening. In the midst of division and polarization, do we commit ourselves to listen to others as a means of healing..., that our parish and families and community be safe and sacred spaces for listening to each other's stories, pain, fear and hope? Do we commit ourselves to listening?

There is a saying in East Africa: "When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." Do we commit ourselves to join with other people of goodwill in speaking-up for the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and underemployed, the differently-abled, the sick...? Will we find our voice to speak up for the poor?

Will we find our voice to speak up against racism? If there is any illusion that racism is a thing of the past, the present moment has thoroughly dispelled such thinking. Will we find our voice to speak up against racism in all its forms?

Will we find our voice to continue to support refugees and migrants – besieged from so many directions at this time ... Will we continue to welcome refugees and immigrants as our brothers and sisters? And find our voice to continue to speak up for refugees and migrants?

Following the lead of our Pope Francis, will we find our voices to protect our environment, joining with others of good-will to care for our common home? Will we find our voice to speak for Mother Earth?

Will we find our voices to speak up for all the marginalized, who at this moment in our Nation have become fearful of their livelihoods and their lives: LGBT folks, women, Black and Brown Americans and others? Will we speak up for the marginalized?

Will we find our voices to defend religious liberty and defy the banning and demonizing of Muslims, to resist racist anti-Semitism as part of a white-nationalism on the rise? Will we speak up and stand up for religious liberty?

Finally:

Will we join the voices of good will calling for *a ban on the creation of* and *for the elimination of all* nuclear weapons with their potential to destroy our world? Will we stand up and speak up for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction? Will we stand-up and proclaim the value of non-violence in our lives and in our world?

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I conclude with the spiritual writer, Megan McKenna's reflection on Christmas:

To experience Christmas in our lives is to live in hope, to be committed to the disciplined love of creating the future for all and to make our own bodies the seed of our highest hope — because God, in God's wondrous promise in Jesus, brought that seed to birth in our world!

God commands that we refuse to succumb to darkness – to despair – to injustice or violence. Christmas is a season of courage. Christmas is a season for midwives and those who give birth to hope and peace!

Amen!