

Somewhere, someone is on a plane headed to surprise their beloved.  
Somewhere, some small child is dancing to *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*.  
Somewhere, someone is obsessing over which ribbons and papers coordinate just so.

And here we are, gathered together, seeking a sense of community at a time when we feel anything but merry and bright. We've come hoping to find a place where we belong – and people to whom we belong – that doesn't hurt, that isn't sad, that isn't swirling in a chaotic frenzy.

We've come tonight to sit in silence with the hope that maybe God will have a Word for us, a message of love and comfort that will bring us a semblance of peace. We've come with a hope that the light of the Christ child will overcome our darkness, and we will emerge from this season buoyed, able to stay afloat, despite the incessant drift, back and forth, on the tides of grief, depression, family dysfunction, emptiness or whatever it is that brought us here.

It's hard to feel flooded with such deep displacement at a time of year when everyone is so determined to please and delight, and the demand for joyfulness is so great. Merriment and cheer and excess feel like a façade, a burden. Melancholy seems more real, more authentic.

If we peel away the layers of commercialization, and the layers of tradition, and even the layers of faith, beneath it all, the story of Christmas is about the birth of a child to poor parents who were members of an oppressed religious minority in an occupied territory. The child is born into a world that is almost unimaginably harsh.

This story already resonates with our stories, if we come into this season with pain or grief. We gather because of that very dissonance—the dissonance between what the culture believes to be at the heart of the celebration of

Christmas (ugly sweater contests, an overabundance/overindulgence of food and drink, and of course shiny, pretty presents) and what truly lies at its heart—the audacity of hope even in the midst of pain or grief and all that is harsh.

There are several truths of Christmas that we don't speak much of. First, if the world were perfect – if there was no death, no disease, no sin, no tragedy, no poverty – Jesus the Christ child would not have been born. Christmas is God's response to a world that suffers and laments.

If ever there were a time when lament was appropriate, Advent is that time: the time of waiting for what will be, a time to look forward in hope for the fulfillment of God's promise even as we grieve for what we had hoped would be but is not.

But we have gathered tonight, because we know that the only way “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house” or wherever we will be for Christmas is through the darkness and into the light ... through the holy honesty of tears and grief and the whole complex of feelings we experience because we are alive and we have depth.

We've gathered together tonight, also because we also understand the truth that this holy work is best worked through – not in isolation – but in community. The miracle of being a part of a faith community, a miracle I have personally relied on more times that I care to recall, is that when one of us is in a place where God seems too far off, that time in prayer seems no different from talking to oneself, others will pray for us. Until they can again pray with us, they pray both on our behalf (all those beautiful “we” prayers in our prayer book: “we believe in one God...”, “we confess that we have sinned against you...”, “we thank you for feeding us with spiritual food...”), as well as for those heavy things we carry (“we pray for the aged and infirm, for the widowed and orphans, and for the sick and suffering...”).

The second truth is this: the Christmas story does not end with baby Jesus laying in a manger, but rather is connected to the Christ, God's own being, on

the cross. Jesus was born the Son of God and died as the Son of Man, only to rise again ~ restoring the entire created order to perfection. That is the gift of incarnation.

God's holy story of God's holy people is the story of God speaking to hurting people who dwell in darkness; it's the story of God acting on behalf of those whose hearts are weary and whose burdens are heavy; it's the story of God gently guiding the displaced and comforting the grief-stricken and shining light into the dark places.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims that “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.”<sup>1</sup>

And in Matthew, Jesus reaches out to us when he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”<sup>2</sup>

And as we heard in church this morning, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’”<sup>3</sup>

Tonight, here in this place, we get to experience another often unspoken truth of Christmas: when those who know lament, who know the darkness of grief, gather together as our honest, real, raw selves, God's light shines its brightest. “In the deepest, blackest night of despair and anxiety, it only takes a pinhole of light ... and all of grace can come in.”<sup>4</sup> When we catch a glimpse of that light, when we feel the warmth of that grace, we do not take for granted the brilliant light of Christ as our hope, as our beacon of promise. Just as we

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:2

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:23

<sup>4</sup> Auburn Sandstrom in “The Phone Call,” recorded on November 21, 2015 and aired on July 5, 2016 on The Moth Podcast. <https://themoth.org/stories/a-phone-call>

carry the heartache of our storms and struggles, so too do we carry with us the memory of the brilliance of God's light and presence in our lives.

The Psalmist sings of this:

LORD, you have searched me out and known me; \*  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.

You trace my journeys and my resting-places \*  
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Where can I go then from your Spirit? \*  
where can I flee from your presence?

If I climb up to heaven, you are there; \*  
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.

If I take the wings of the morning \*  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

Even there your hand will lead me \*  
and your right hand hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, \*  
and the light around me turn to night,"

Darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day; \*  
darkness and light to you are both alike.<sup>5</sup>

The beauty of *this* gathering is that each of us tonight are lights that are shining in the darkness of the others gathered here. Every one of us serves as the illuminating incarnate presence of Emmanuel for others who are acquainted with the dark.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 139:1-2,6-11

Jesus is here: present with all of us whose souls long to be re-constructed, long to be fulfilled, long to be at peace. Jesus has come to be among us, to show us the Shalom of God, the peace of God that passes all understanding.

The birth of the blessed babe does not heal our grief. The nearness of God does not send the cold or the darkness scurrying away—not tonight, at least. But the nearness of God is real, whether we feel it or not. The nearness of God can be depended upon, if not experienced. Even if we feel that the darkness will swallow us and all the available light, even the darkness is not dark to God. The night is as bright in God’s all-seeing eyes as the day.

Perhaps the audacity of hope is this: even in the deepest darkness, when our tired and searching eyes cannot see their way to the light, we can rest in the arms of the One whose eyes see clear through to eternity. We don’t have to see it ourselves. We can simply know that it is seen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to <http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/> for allowing me chunks of her reflection to work with.