

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 25, 2021 (Christmas Day)

I have to admit, I never attended a Christmas Day service until I became a priest. Growing up, we always went on Christmas Eve. And if my parents had tried to drag me away from my new toys on Christmas morning, well, there would have been much weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But I've come to love this service with its joyfully contemplative and socially-distanced vibe. There's a sense of stillness after the storm. The shepherds have returned to their fields; the multitude of angels have dispersed; the animals have settled down; the baby has stopped crying. I imagine Joseph enjoying a moment of satisfied quiet, as baby Jesus sleeps on his mother's breast.

It is into this tranquil sliver of holiness that we gather this morning. There's no fanfare, beyond a few Christmas carols. It's just us kneeling before the manger, coming into the presence of the Christ child, embodying what it means to sing, "O come let us adore him."

And this stillness, this understated joy beautifully reflects the humble entrance of our Savior into the world. The one who took on human flesh not in a palace, but in a stable; the one who was laid down to sleep not in a jewel-encrusted crib, but in a feeding trough. The poetic language of the prologue to John's gospel effortlessly resounds in the stillness: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

And as we join the holy family in this moment of stillness, we can imagine the sun rising in the east on that first Christmas morning. Turning the shadow of night into the light of day. Illuminating the stillness as dawn breaks from on high. A reminder that the *true* light has indeed come into the world. And that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

It's true that light shines even brighter when set against a backdrop of darkness. When you light a candle in a dark room, like when the power goes out at night, it shines so much brighter than it does when you light a few candles at the dinner table. But it's also true that when light shines in the darkness, there are still shadows. That's just the nature of the interplay between light and dark. Jesus' entrance into the world doesn't automatically wipe away the hard things in our lives. But with the light of Christ we can move through them, we can take that next step.

So this light is a reflection of the fact that no matter what is happening in your life, no matter how dark it gets, the Light of Christ is with you. Even when we can't see it or feel it, the Light of Christ, the light that came into the world on a clear night in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago, illuminates our path. Like a lantern to our feet, this light shows us the way, serving as a reminder that God is always with us, even amid the darkness; especially amid the darkness.

I remember learning in science class that there is actually no such thing as total darkness. It doesn't matter if you go into a hermetically sealed room without windows. What looks like complete darkness to the human eye is actually filled with an incalculable number of neutrinos. These subatomic particles, known as ghost particles, can't be captured or seen but they are everywhere. 100 million of them pass through our bodies every second. Now, I have no idea how any of this works — I think dark matter is involved, and something about the Big Bang theory. But these neutrinos offer a form of light that we cannot see.

All of which feels an awful lot like the essence of this day: which is hope. Because in a similar way, the Light of Christ is always with us. No matter what we do or where we go, no matter what we endure or what we encounter, God entering the world in human form means the divine presence is everywhere. As John puts it, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." So Jesus entering the world reminds us that God infuses all things and all situations and all circumstances. Like those ghost particles, God is just there. Sometimes invisible to the naked eye, but always present nonetheless.

So, I'm glad you're here this morning to sit in the stillness of Jesus' birth, to revel in the calm *after* the storm. Often it is only after the fact that we're able to see God's presence most clearly. I know I often look back on the day's events or things that have happened in my life and it's only in those moments of subsequent reflection that I can most visibly see God's hand at work. The same is true for the miracle of Christmas — sometimes we need some space, some peace and quiet, in order to fully appreciate and delight in what God has done.

Perhaps that's what I most love about this service. The opportunity to step back with John the Evangelist himself and revel in all that has taken place at the manger. To gaze in wonder at this child who is the fullest expression of God's deep and abiding love for all of humanity, and for each one of us.