

A Sermon for Christmas Eve

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2207

St. Christopher's, Chatham

*Light Shines in the Darkness*

## I

### The Journey to Bethlehem

So... we meet again -- at Christmastime... in the spirit of this holy season. We meet *at* the manger, so to speak, in the much beloved story of the birth of the Savior. What T. S. Eliot refers to as, "the still point in a spinning universe...." (*Burnt Norton*), and what the prophet Isaiah refers to as "the light that shines in the darkness..."

Another year and we are all changed, for better, for worse. We have willingly changed some parts of our lives, but life has also changed us – either willingly or unwillingly as the case may be!

Another road, a different road perhaps, brings us to this particular Christmas. And so we trudge up this road lugging baggage, some new, some old: Our loves and hates, our fears of death and our fears of life, our anxieties, our longings, our doubts, our suffering and our losses, but lest we forget, "light" -- our joys, happiness, and successes. (Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, p. 3) Buechner also said, "...you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you." (Ibid) So, we bring the richness of our "inner" world with us tonight.

## II

### The Search for Light

But one thing has not changed during the past year: We are still searching -- for meaning, for help, for love, for God Almighty. Call it what you will... The prophet Isaiah called it -- "light" -- "*Light that shines in the Darkness.*" Not the light that physicists can describe – waves or particles; but, instead, holy light, the "ground" of life, love, joy, hope and faith. It is the light that delivers us, rescues us and saves us from darkness of life. It is God's light. Isaiah lyrically describes it this way: "*The people who walked in*

*darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*" We are traveling through darkness this evening, and we are searching for light, and, somehow we know that our lives, our hopes and dreams all depend on it.

### III.

#### A Child is the Light of Life

And here is the mystery of Christmas: a child is the Light that shines in the darkness. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'"* (Isaiah 9)

*And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."* (Luke 2)

Again, the talented Frederick Buechner writes: *"...through the birth of [this child] Jesus a life giving power was released into the world..."* (The Faces of Jesus, p. 15)

Light! Life! Love! This is what the child means for us.

### IV.

#### Christmas Pageant

Wes Avram, a Yale Divinity School professor, described his experience with the "light of Jesus" at a children's Christmas pageant. (Where the Light Shines Through, p. 33) Evidently a small church in Maine could not muster up a live baby Jesus for the annual Christmas pageant, so the uncreative rector decided to use a plastic doll wrapped in a wool blanket. Roxanne, the fifteen year-old playing Mary, would have nothing to do with it. She had other ideas. She took flashlight and placed a small lampshade over the lens of it and then wrapped it all in a woolen blanket and turned it on. Muted light shone up and out from the center of the bundle of baby. Here was baby Jesus! -- a beautiful and magnificent symbol of the infant Jesus as the Savoir spilling and leaking light all over the place.

## V.

### A Manger: Khwiliba Parish, Maseno, Kenya

This past fall, I took an unintended journey to a manger. This manger happened to be located in Kenya – in a place called Maseno. The road to Maseno is filled with corrupt police, scam artists, danger, accidents, desperation and the devastation of AIDS. Five hundred orphans showed up to be fed at the feeding program St. Christopher's endows. Not unlike the road to ancient Bethlehem.

One Friday, I, along with my four hosts, walked along a red clay path through the lush grasses and trees of the countryside in order to visit six or so homes – essentially mud huts with thatched roofs. We approached one home with children playing in the yard and some goats meandering around. Inside the dark interior of the hut, I was introduced to a twelve year-old girl holding ten month-old infant, a few more small children stood or sat by. They looked at me through sad but luminous eyes. They possessed beautiful, shiny black faces, and gleaming white teeth. They radiated the light and beauty of innocence and vulnerability.

"Jambo," I said.

She mustered a very slight smile and said, "Welcome." This small girl was THE caregiver for this family. Her parents, all the adults, were gone -- wiped out by AIDS. Innocence was valiantly attempting to nurture innocence. It was a heartbreaking and tragic sight, as children suffering always is. It was darkness that needed light.

I felt like the world had forsaken these children. "*My God, my God why hast thou forsaken them?*" (These are words of the Palmist and the words of Jesus from the Cross.)

Buechner says: "*My God where the Hell are you, if thou art true Father who art in heaven, be thou also our Father who art in Hell because Hell is where the action is, where I am and the cross is. It is where the problems storm us. It is where we labor and are heavy burdened under the burden of our lives without you.*" (Telling the Truth, p. 39) This situation was hell-like. It was darkness incarnate.

And then it came to me. Hell is where God is NOT. God WAS here in Maseno. This situation was not unlike a fourteen year-old, un-married peasant girl named Mary

giving birth to the child Jesus in the harsh reality of a dirty stable and without much hope for the future.

And then light began to break into my mind and the scene I was witnessing. Light was pouring through the beauty and innocence of these children's faces -- of this Mary, of this baby. Just like that "flashlight" Jesus did at that pageant in Maine. "Light shines in darkness," says Isaiah, and the darkness can't overcome it. This is the gospel truth. It is God's promise to us. That's what happened to me in that hut in Kenya. God found me as I blindly stumbled along in my searching and he changed me.

Light was shining in the work of: the Anglican Mother's Union – church woman who look after orphans of Khwiliba parish; a young man named, Eric – who in his gentleness and love for these orphans– was, I am convinced, an angel; church feeding programs, like ours, which were filling stomachs and hopefully souls; dedicated and wonderful missionaries – Dr. and Mrs. Hardison – who literally feed and care for thousands of bodies, minds, spirits and souls; three young medical students from Germany as well as a young American pediatrician from Mass Generally aptly name Christianna.

There was light, muted, flickering, yet unwavering -- it was the light of Christ. It was as if God were saying to me and all others:

- My power is paradoxically made perfect in weakness
- My Light shines in darkness
- Light shines in and through the brokenness of life
- Light shines through the cracks of life

If you are searching for me, then LOOK HERE.

VI.

Hope

*"God does not give answers, he gives Himself."* (Buechner, The Faces of Jesus)

I learned that there is hope because a *savoir* was born into the world -- into the lives of these children and into *our lives, our darkness, into our souls*. I learned that the birth of

every child is a reminder that “Jesus Christ has come!” —to rescue, deliver, heal and love.

To each of you who are searching either consciously or unconsciously: Look for the Living Christ in the brokenness of your lives and in the brokenness of our world -- in the discord, problems, suffering and losses. The Christ of the Cross lives and reigns there. Look for the muted light shining up like a flashlight beam illuminating the darkness of your soul. It is there.

There is Hope for me and you – hope for our pain, failures, and mistakes. The light shines through the brokenness and “cracks” of life.

## VII.

### Epilogue: Icon

On the same day I arrived in Boston from Kenya, my mother arrived from her home in Switzerland bearing a gift for me: an icon of the Holy Family. It depicts Mary as she stares at Jesus and Jesus stares directly into My eyes with serious, uncompromising, Holy, light-filled eyes. He stares into my soul burning it with holy fire, with Light and Life. His eyes – the window of the soul - radiate the Light of God.

When I look at this icon, I see the face of that little Kenyan girl bearing that baby and staring at that child confident that He is here to save. And I know that God sees this Kenyan Mary and all the children, just as the eyes of Jesus look out from the Icon. God promises us his Living Presence, so I know He has found them; I know that He will never forsake them; I know that he will rescue them; I know he loves them. For light shines in the darkness and the darkness doesn't have a chance.

And I also know that He does the same for you and me. I know because this is the promise of God and you can wager your life and the life of your soul on that.

And so..... I pray to God through this icon. And I say... a confident and hopeful thank you...to God. I thank Him for these Kenyan children... for this child Jesus, and the pains he continues to go through to reach us. I thank him for light... for love and grace... for providing us with the end and answer to our searching.. I thank Him for eternally grasping us. I thank Him... I thank Him... I thank Him...

Merry Christmas.

*AMEN*