

Darkness and Light

Christmas Eve is now upon us! Cosmically this is the time in the Earth's rotation around the sun that we experience the longest days of actual darkness. This is no accident. We celebrate Advent and Christmas Eve in sync with this astronomical reality to remind us that Jesus' birth not only brings us the enlightening encounter with God made flesh, but that the very cosmos itself is linked to the mystery and promise of Jesus' birth.

As Christmas greets us, the shift from darkness to light begins not only in our hearts, but in our day to day life in the physical universe.

With a divided nation and the threat of terrorism a reality in our world, it may seem like the darkness of this current season will never end. And if you add to all of that the pressure that is often generated around Christmas for "everything to be perfect" this might very well feel like the darkest time of the year.

Even without the troubling events in our nation, I'm willing to bet that the pressures of this season finds many families, couples, and individuals experiencing petty arguments that are made a little bit more intense by the pressure of the season.

Maybe some of you are feeling the pain of new wounds or the ghost of old arguments that have never been resolved and the holidays just seem to open up wounds you'd rather forget.

So let's just admit that amid the promised joy there are moments when we smile and say, "Merry Christmas" even as we ache inside and wonder, in the end, if the birth of this miraculous baby has anything to do with us at all.

In this current time, maybe more than ever before, I want to assure you of the good news that the answer is *yes, yes, yes, a thousand times yes!* The fragility of the human condition is *precisely* the reason God chooses to come to us in the flesh.

So often we can get lost in despair because we feel we must somehow be perfect or have perfect lives in order to be worthy of God's love. We think we must ascend to a state of some undefiled holiness in order to rise to God's presence.

But in the miracle of Jesus' birth our God says, my people, my children, it is I who will come to you. I come to you in your fear, I come to you in your despair, I even come to you in the busy-ness of your own making. I come to you in the midst of family stress and I especially will come to you in your grief, your pain, and your imperfections.

God comes to be with us *everywhere*, in any condition we may find ourselves in. In our happiness or sorrow, in glory or disgrace, God *never* abandons us. From his birth to his death God in Christ laughed, cried, suffered, grieved. Why, he's even had pitched arguments with members of his family---- just like us.^[1]

There is no situation in our lives no matter how secret or hidden, how embarrassing, or shameful or devastatingly heartbreaking that is beyond the reach of God's love.

This may ring hollow in light of the tragedies in our world and many people fearfully ask the question, "How can a loving and merciful God allow such terrible things to happen?"

In answer to this haunting question we are reminded of the deeper meaning of the Christmas feast: that God empties God's self of power and enters into human form, suffering with us in our freedom: our freedom to protect and nurture life, as well as our freedom, sadly and tragically, to harm and destroy life.

^[1] Possibly paraphrased from Barbara Brown Taylor!

Yes, this terrible freedom does allow unspeakable things to happen. But the greater truth is that God's solidarity and love for us, in spite of human frailties, gives us an even greater power.

As darkness lengthens and the promised light seems only a vague hope, we must claim the full power that God has granted us: the power to love others as miraculously as God loves us, the power to forgive as extravagantly as God forgives us, the power to heal as completely as God heals, and the power to bring hope just when it seems all hope is lost.

Come and worship with us this Saturday and Sunday just as you are, however this holy season finds you, and allow the love and grace of God absorb the stress and potential pain of holiday pressures in your life. Come in these days of encroaching darkness and dare to believe that the Light will come.

Wishing You a Holy Christmas, Stephanie+