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Christmas Eve

Let your goodness, God, appear to us that we, made in your image, conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot imitate your majesty and power and wonder nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens through the clouds to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest gift of all -- the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands; embrace us with your tiny arms and pierce our hearts with soft, sweet cries. Amen

Welcome to all of you on this holiest of nights. I want to begin with a story about a young man named Marty. Marty was a bright lively eight-year-old who suffered from a minor disability; he was deaf in one ear. He lived in a rural community of farms and fences. Marty's mom, Diane, was proud of her son; she knew he had a kind and loving heart. Several weeks before Christmas one year Marty shared this secret with his mother. He had been doing extra chores and saving up his allowance in order to buy a Christmas present, a pocket compass, for his best friend Kenny. Kenny was being raised by a single mom, and life for their family was a daily struggle just to acquire the most basic of needs of food and clothing.

Diane knew that Kenny's mom was a very proud woman, and Diane doubted that Kenny's mom would allow Kenny to accept a gift if he couldn't give one in return. Marty argued with his mother and finally said, "But what if it was a secret? What if they never found out who gave it to him?" Diane finally relented. If somehow Marty could give Kenny the gift without anyone knowing who gave it that would be acceptable. So, on Christmas Eve Diane watched her son walk out the door, across the wet pasture and slip beneath the electric fence on his mission of kindness. Marty raced up to Kenny's door and pressed the doorbell; then he ran down the steps and across the yard so he wouldn't be seen. Suddenly the electric fence loomed in front of him; he could not avoid it. The shock knocked him to the ground and he gasped for breath. Slowly he got up and stumbled home, and when he arrived home Diane treated the blister on Marty's face caused by the electric fence; then she put him to bed. That night as Diane tucked Marty in, she silently complained to God for allowing her son to be hurt when he was performing such a good deed.

The next day, however, Kenny came to the front door excitedly talking about his new compass. Amazingly, Marty, who you remember is deaf in one ear, seemed to hear Kenny talking with both of his ears. A few weeks later a school nurse confirmed what Diane suspected: Marty's hearing in his deaf ear had been completely restored! Though doctors said it might be the shock from the electric fence, Diane believed with all her heart that it was a Christmas miracle.

Christmas, I believe, is a night for miracles. It is a magical night of wonder and faith. The children are excited; moms and dads are excited too as they remember the joy and anticipation they felt as youngsters as Christmas approached, and they see that same joy in the eyes of their children today.

How good it is to hear the prophetic words of Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a land of deep darkness, a light has dawned, for to us a child is born; to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

All of us know what it is to walk in darkness at some time in our lives. Darkness comes in many forms: loneliness, pain, grief, confusion, heartache. All these emotions seem to be intensified at Christmas. It's no accident that Christmas falls just after the shortest day of our year. December 21st known as the winter solstice, is usually the shortest day because the sun is shining directly on the Tropic of Capricorn, meaning that it is the day that we receive the least amount of direct sunlight. And many you are familiar with the term "seasonal affective disorder" -- SAD. Periods of physical darkness can breed depression and melancholy and sadness.

But at the darkest time of the year our world turns a corner! From today on our days will get longer. There will be a little more sunlight each day, and Christmas reminds us that that light is coming into our world in a physical sense as well as a spiritual one.

The shepherds out on the Judean hillside knew about darkness in a way that city dwellers, particularly modern city dwellers cannot. There was no artificial lighting in their world. The only light came from the stars above. So you can imagine how startled they were to be suddenly surrounded by a great light. And Luke tells us "an angel appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shown upon them." The glory of the Lord is a wonderful thing, but when you are not expecting it, it must have seemed like an alien invasion.

Luke tells us the shepherds were terrified. They had never experienced light like this, but the angel assured them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause you great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. Suddenly,” Luke tells us, “a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’”

In the darkness there is a light that shines, and that light is a babe born in Bethlehem. That’s the good news of this night. In John, chapter 8, verse 12, Jesus says to us: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” If you are experiencing any darkness in your life right now, there is a light dawning and that light is an infant born to be our Savior -- yours and mine. That light never goes out. If you are experiencing a time of darkness in your life, there is hope, and that hope has to do with a small baby lying in a manger. That babe has brought light into the world. That baby has changed our world. Those of you who are parents know how a baby can do that.

I want to get very personal for a moment. Our family has experienced in the last six months a very difficult situation with one of my nieces. She decided at age sixteen that school was just not for her. She had gone through a time in school where she had received the highest grades, was a very good athlete, an excellent musician, but for some reason she gave up on school. She gave up on the pursuit of knowledge, and she found in alcohol and drugs a friend that she thought would really help her. And there’s just been one thing after another that has happened to her since that time. She’s been at odds with her mother, her grandmother, her aunt and uncle; she has not been willing to listen to reason. She decided that leaving school was the best for her, and she found a boyfriend who had a similar view of life. He enjoyed alcohol and drugs and found that life was so much more happy if you didn’t have to go to school, and you could get up late in the morning and just enjoy alcohol and drugs which made you high and happy all day.

But things had gotten worse -- she didn’t speak with her mother, her grandmother; she moved out, she moved away, her uncle and aunt were persona non grata. But then one of her grandmothers died and there was a funeral, and at that funeral in tears she told all of us that she had become pregnant, adding this misery to all that had happened. But yet, somehow in the midst of all this terrible darkness, this coming of a new baby brought the

daughter and mother together, the grandmother, mother and daughter together; even uncle and aunt were now accepted and realize they may have something to say in her life. The baby, in the worst of circumstances, has been a blessing. One baby changed all of our lives.

A light shines on purpose. It is the darkest part of the night that we are most prone to see the light of God. When the world needed the light the most, Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. But it's also true of our lives. When we need the light of God the most is when we are most likely to see that light.

Several years ago I went to visit a man who was experiencing darkness in his life. The man suffered from a stroke which affected both his legs, one arm and most of his speech. He was frustrated because he was unable to communicate with other people, and especially his beloved wife. His life was filled with loneliness and some anger. One day I came to visit him at the nursing home. I found it difficult to communicate with the man for very long. I was tempted to ignore the man and talk to his wife or to ask him some simple questions, much as people do when talking to a baby. As I was getting ready to leave I remembered reading that some stroke victims can sing, even though they cannot talk. Now, I'm not the world's greatest singer as you all know, but I began singing one of my absolute favorite hymns: "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright." It seemed like a miracle, but the man who had suffered the stroke, the man who had had such difficulty communicating with anyone, also began singing! There was no stuttering, no breakdown of forming words -- he just sang: "Round yon virgin, Mother and Child, Holy Infant so tender and mild," and as the man reached for my hand to hold, his wife joins us in the singing: "Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace." We finish; the man smiled. God was there.

If that seems like a miracle, remember that Christmas IS a time of miracles. A light shines in the darkness. The glory of God shone around shepherds on a bleak Judean hillside, a babe is born in a manger in Bethlehem. Rejoice! Your light, my light, has some.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs