

## LEAVE THE LIGHT ON

Christmas Eve 2009

*John 1: 1-14*

**H**ow many and different are the reasons that we have come here tonight. Part for the perfect topping on the Christmas cake. Part to float down the river of tradition in the carols and the greens and the candlelight doubled in a hundred faces. Part for the ancient story, part for honor, part for praise to God. Part for a time with family such as you rarely make. How many more times will it be like this, with just these loved ones near? You hardly dare ask. Ask not . . . it tolls for thee. But after all is said, only deep things are able to move a whole people through the dance steps of tradition to come through these doors tonight.

Things do not appear deep on the surface. Half of each of us is already out the doors. Some children are here but in body, so diverted are they by the promise of the coming day. And you? After these candles are out and family festivities wrap up, does more scissor-work and tape await? Tomorrow, greetings hale and warm will pass a thousand million lips. We are already calling from an upper window to the boy in the market square, "Hallo! my fine fellow! Do you know the poulterer's in the next street but one, at the corner? Do you know whether they've sold the prize Turkey that was hanging up there? Not the little prize Turkey: the big one?" Busy, fruitful day. Have we time for this service and its spirits?

It is still night, which bears some advantage, for by the smallest of light, you can see some things better: stars, for example. This is what I have seen better by only a little light, year by year, as I have watched faces old and young, familiar and strange, press into the evening service. Christmas Eve is a night light in God's house, and God's house is the world.

When visitors come to stay with you, you leave a light on all through the night. It is part of the ritual of the overnight stay in a strange place made welcoming by the host: here is the bed, here the extra blanket; here is the bath, the towels—and we leave this light on . . . all night. The reason for the word is plain: visitors are strangers in the dark; young ones even more so. And strangers need the promise of light for welcome, and the light itself for guidance and for safety. But on earth, which is the house of God, we are all strangers. Our stay is only brief; we are not home. Tonight we listen to our host, the heavenly Host. The Lord of the house welcomes you, shelters you for the night, and bids me tell you now: We leave this light on, the Christ light . . . all night. For it is night indeed, and you are strangers. Here is guidance and safety and promise: We leave this light on always, a light to our humanity, for all humanity. It is Christmas Eve.

What is the dark? Shall we say? It is the human pathos that without knowing whom I prick, I, blind, can pin a tale upon your beastly burdens:

Shall we pray?

For the mother not here, the father not here: whether for distance, disaffection, divorce, disease, death, or drunkenness.

For the love that has wavered and collapsed like a tower misbuilt on shifting sands.

For the bitterness of living married with a stranger who carries no love to the house, no wood to the stove.

For minds gone wandering into darkness beyond the last light.

For those whose seriousness is shut up inside them, who talk and talk and talk to keep ghosts of truth away.

For teenagers who for confusion and no love run their lives to a cliff.

For practicers of lies who have burned holes in their lives, like a great tapestry marred, still hanging.

For men who hit their wives and do not cease.

For women learning how no more to bear it.

For children bent into poverty of mind and body by their parent's drink.

For men and women disabled and imprisoned more by others' disregard than by their infirmities.

For beloved ones who died too soon.

For those who face their bodies' verdict: M.S., cancer, heart disease, arthritis, AIDS . . . —ah, these words

like spirits that have severed what was from what is yet to come.

For those who play at solitaire, though they had rather have been good at hearts.

For those who push in business and push and push to get their way, till all the gift for sifting right and wrong is gone.

For all of us, who push and push the earth to deliver our way, at our price, till sense is spent for all creatures great and small made one in God.

For you who have buried life's mate: and we hardly know or stop to watch with you the silent movies of a thousand joys gone winking into night.

For women in lawless lands, raped and killed as they hunt for wood to make the daily meal.

For our wills that crumple in the faces of evil as we count the cost of resistance.

Amen. And amen. And enough.

Does it seem that to pray such hard things is not the Christmas spirit? See it by another light this night. For just this! we have this silent night. The shepherds' news is good news only because the dark is dark with sorrow. If God be born into *this* house, *this* world, with eye all open for all who suffer here, then God is God as you had not dared hope—God who leaves a light on that you may find your way through any night, from that first to this last. It is this that has made men shout for joy and women mother Christ.

When I was small, my mother had us children say a prayer on the stair to bed at the end of this night. We held, each one of us, our own fat candle:

I  
have  
a  
Christ-  
mas  
candle,  
A candle  
tall and red.  
I light it in  
the evening  
And place it  
by my bed.  
Then if the  
little Christ child  
Should come on  
Christmas night,  
He'd enter into  
my small room  
And bless me and my light.

John the Evangelist said it long ago for all the world to hear: "The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the dark, and darkness has not overcome it." It is on all night.

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