

A Christmas Eve Message

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts
First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest
December 24, 2020, at 9:00pm

Friends, one year ago on this very same night, this Sanctuary was packed with worshipers lifting up their voices with carols, lifting up their prayers with gratitude, and holding up candles in honor of the Christ-Child, Light of the World.

O what a difference, just one short year can make! This Christmas Eve, the Sanctuary holds only the members of our Worship Team, and the long wooden pews aren't filled with smiling people gladly rubbing shoulders. Yet this house is not really empty: for you are here, present through the power of technology, but much more through the power of the Holy Spirit, which unites our hearts tonight in love. We believe in one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one God and Father of all, which truly makes us one BIG family.

Astronomically speaking, December is the darkest month. But this December, the darkness seems deeper as we all battle this pandemic which, like a brightly-burning fire on the beach hit by a sudden gust out of the darkness, has scattered the embers across the sand. It's hard for individual embers to keep burning brightly without the reinforcement of each other—which is no less true for us. On this frigid night especially, our hearts—and our prayers—are carrying the plight of the homeless, who, like Joseph and Mary on the night of Jesus' birth, have no place to come in from the cold. And inside our hospitals, we are praying for the growing numbers of sick who are fighting this virus one labored breath at a time, cut off from the comfort of family and friends as their doctors and nurses labor night and day to save them, sometimes with their last full measure of devotion. Yes, the darkness is deep this December, maybe even as deep as the time of Isaiah, more than 2500 years ago, when those people who “walked in darkness saw a great light,” and when those people who lived in a land of deep darkness—“on them the light shined.”

Did you see the Christmas Star this week? The Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, not seen on earth since 1226, When Genghis Khan ruled China? It was hidden last Monday, but I saw it just after sunset on Tuesday as the waves of Lake Michigan moaned on the rocks down at Forest Beach, and it filled me with consolation: I saw not just one Star, but two, side-by-side like Peter and Will Elliott, the twin brothers who are happily live-streaming this service to wherever you are tonight, or perhaps even more like the two vaccines which now offer a way forward to safely be together again. That's what Stars can do for those who look up from dark places—they bring us hope, their radiance changes everything. It's one thing to walk blindly in the dark: it's entirely different to walk in the dark knowing where you're headed: to look up and know the dawn will come! And because of this one birth in Bethlehem, we know we don't walk that road alone.

Tonight, we can hear again the old, old story: of shepherds and angels; of mother and child, when the heavens themselves sang bright glory to God! And tonight, we can we not hear the echo of that same heavenly choir in our music and singing, in the tones of the pipe organ, in the familiar carols we love? I hope you've been singing along, too, as you are watching in your own homes, perhaps surrounded by your family—or perhaps tuning in alone. Yes—this is indeed a very different Christmas. But what lies at the heart of Christmas hasn't changed. It never will. What lies at its heart is the real birth of a real boy in a stall among farm animals, outside the doors of the inn. Through that birth, the whole world tonight is coming in from the cold, and into the Light, where God can be found among us, and the hearth-fire is merrily burning. My beleaguered friends, may this holy warmth, the warmth that comes by knowing you are not forgotten; that God cares about you and calls you by your name—may that warmth and light sink deep into your hearts and homes tonight!

No—we may not be able to be all together, but in Christ Jesus, we are never alone. Through him, we are children of one heavenly Father, sisters and brothers in Christ. We can carry each other through this. We can mingle our laughter and tears...

This Christmas, I've been inspired by our own children, who performed the Annual Christmas Pageant largely outdoors, solemnly wearing their masks and costumes as the Three Wise Men offered their presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Like the original Wise Men, the Pageant this year had "to come home by another way." But they brought me home with them.

I've been inspired by the story of a little boy in England named Eliot who, while suffering from brain cancer, told his parents he did not need any Christmas presents last year, but wanted to give them to other children who were sick and in the hospital. Even while having brain surgery himself during the pandemic, by his efforts and example, this Christmas there will be hundreds of hospitalized children receiving vanloads of presents in England because of what God put in the heart and will of this one 8 yr. old.

Today, I learned that two of our First Pres. families are going out to carol outside the windows of people who must celebrate Christmas alone, and just this afternoon, I watched on Facebook as our old family doctor from Kansas, long retired, received his vaccine because he has returned bravely to serve in the one Emergency Room that serves a whole county. Like the Star which the Magi followed, these things fill me with hope—a "sure and certain hope" that because of this one birth in Bethlehem, God is truly near us and with us and in us: in power and glory and love!

We may not be able to choose the outward circumstances of our living, as we deal with whatever the world is throwing at us...but what we can do is to remember and reclaim what lies at its heart—or should I say, Who. On this night and every night, we can remember that our life itself is a present—and when we remove the wrappings, however torn and tattered they may be, inside we will find something of splendor, woven with wisdom, power and love. Something to keep us warm and bright when our embers get scattered;

--with grace to serve,

--love to embrace each other,

--hope to keep on walking;

--and faith to change the world.

Some open that present sooner than others.

What are you holding, tonight?

Now may the Manger warm you with its hearth-light;

May the Spirit re-kindle your joy;

May Christ wrap you tightly in his peace;

And God embrace you, with everlasting arms.

Amen.

-Rev. Clinton G. Roberts