

## Christmas Eve – 2007

### Light, Life, and Love

Merry Christmas!

I know this is not a night for a lot of extra words. In our music, in the glow of the candles, in the reading of the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke, and in our prayers, the meaning and message of Christmas comes through on its own. We come here tonight already knowing what tonight means. We come here tonight already knowing what Christmas is really all about. We don't need extra words to convince us. So my extra words tonight are not meant to convince you of anything. I hope all of you go home from this service looking forward to tomorrow's celebration -- however you celebrate it -- quietly or loudly -- with stockings filled by Santa or by a tree surrounded by presents or maybe by taking a walk, or maybe by just relaxing and listening to some music -- maybe having a nice meal with friends and loved ones -- I hope all of you have a happy, merry Christmas.

My words, therefore, are not meant to tell you how to understand or celebrate Christmas. Rather, these words tonight are offered as illumination, as a way perhaps of looking at Christmas through our eyes of faith. And I'll do that by having us look just a little more closely at three Christmas symbols or images.

First -- just gaze with me a bit at these candles -- during Advent we lit the blue candles of hope, peace, joy and love. Tonight we lit the white Christ candle, the candle representing Christ as the light that has come into the world. At the end of our service we'll be lighting other candles, too -- we'll dim the lights in our sanctuary, and in the glow of candlelight we'll sing these lovely words: "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." All is bright. Lights on our Christmas trees, lights decorating the outside of our homes, candles in the windows -- in all kinds of ways, Christmas is the season of light.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." That's the good news of Christmas. Not that the light removes all darkness, but that the

light shines *in* the darkness. Celebrating Christmas is never about pretending that everything is merry, everything is jolly, everything is beautiful, everything is as it is meant to be. No, we celebrate Christmas because the darkness in our world does not overcome the light that still shines. Think about that with me. What is the darkness in our world right now? War. Violence. Political and religious oppression. Poverty. Epidemics. Disasters. What is the darkness in your own life? Family conflict. Financial struggles. Illness. Sadness. We know, don't we, that all is not peaceful, all is not calm, all is not lovely in our world, or even in our own homes and in our own lives. But the light still shines -- darkness may be everywhere, but the light still shines. That's what Christmas is all about. Believe in the light. When it all seems like too much, believe in the light. Trust that God will never let it go out. This candle on Christmas Eve may not seem like a whole lot -- it's just a candle, right? Well -- look at it more closely with me -- gaze into its flame. And know, deep down in your heart, that in this flame is all the hope and peace and joy and love of God that we need. One candle may not seem like a big deal -- but this candle represents God's everlasting light -- a light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

A candle. And a tree. An evergreen tree -- a tree that's ever green. Up and down our streets are the bare-branched maples and oaks -- the bare forsythia bushes, the bare dogwoods. But the firs and spruces are green. When most everything else turns lifeless brown or stands empty, the evergreens are a vivid reminder of life. Even in the cold and gloom and grayness of winter, the evergreen tree stands defiantly and proudly in all its loveliness. In the Cherokee tradition there's a story called *Why Some Trees are Ever Green* -- here's a bit of it: "In the beginning the Great Mystery gathers all plants and animals together, and the Great Mystery wants to give a gift to all the plants and the animals, but the Great Mystery does not know what gift to give to which plants and which trees. So he gathers them all together and says to the trees and the plants, 'Try to stay up all night for seven nights.' Well, the first night the young plants and trees, even if they wanted to, could not fall asleep. They were so excited. On the second night some dozed off. On the third night, in order to keep awake, the plants and trees began talking to one another. On the fourth, fifth, and sixth nights, though, many fell asleep, until finally the Great Mystery arrived on the seventh night. The only plants and trees that were awake were the spruce, the fir, the holly and the laurel. The Great Mystery said, 'What great endurance you

have. Because you have stayed awake, I will give you the gift of being ever green, so that even in the seeming dead of winter, when all the other trees have lost their leaves, your brother and sister creatures can look into your leaves and know that life is protected.” (from John Shea’s sermon, “Have a Defiant Christmas”, [www.csec.org](http://www.csec.org))

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas tree,  
 How lovely are your branches!  
 In beauty green will always grow  
 Through summer sun and winter snow.  
 O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
 How lovely are your branches.

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
 Your beauty green will teach me  
 That hope and love will ever be  
 The way to joy and peace for me.  
 O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
 Your beauty green will teach me.

The Christmas tree is a sign of life that is ever green, ever new, ever full, ever hopeful, ever strong. And again, isn’t that what Christmas is all about? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

Light. Life. And love.

“Love came down at Christmas,” we sing. “Love all lovely, love divine.” And what is the symbol for love here tonight? This manger. This babe. Emmanuel. God with us. Jesus, the Savior. Jesus, the one born as a sign of God’s love -- a love so strong, a love so real, a love so complete, a love so wondrous – that God couldn’t stay away from us at all, but came to us as one of us just so we could know him and receive all that he has to give us. Isn’t that amazing? At Christmas do you remember how loved you are by God? How

even if you've messed up during the year, even if all is not lovely in your own life, even if this Christmas you're crying more than you're laughing, this manger is a sign of love for you? Forgiveness, strength, assurance, guidance, mercy, acceptance -- God's love is all these things and more. And they are offered to each of us -- and they are offered to all the world. If Christmas means anything at all to us, let it mean love. God's love made flesh in Jesus Christ -- God's love for all creation in all the world, and of course, our love for one another.

Hear these words about the meaning of Christmas by Henry Van Dyke -- they are excerpts from an essay titled "Keeping Christmas":

"But there is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas . . . . Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people and to remember what other people have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you and to think what you owe the world . . . to see that your fellow men are just as real as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy; to know that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life; to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe and look around for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness -- are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas."

"Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and the desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts . . . are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas."

"Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world -- stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death -- and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem . . . is the image and brightness of the Eternal love? Then you can keep Christmas. And if you can keep it for a day, why not always?" (In *A Family Christmas*, by Caroline Kennedy, pp. 10-11).

Why not always? Because light, life, and love aren't just Christmas gifts, are they? And Christmas isn't just a day on the calendar is it? It's really a way of living in the world, as those who trust in the light no matter what, who give thanks

for ever green life, and who share God's love with all God's people. So may your Christmas be merry tonight and tomorrow, but really, may Christmas guide your thoughts and words and actions year-round -- may its light give you warmth and illumination; may its life give you strength and hope, and may its love dwell in your hearts forever. Amen.