

Christmas Eve 2012 Meditation - Winsted UMC

We're almost there, where we will hear the reading from Luke's Gospel that tells us about Jesus' birth, and how Mary and Joseph had to travel even though she was about ready to deliver her child, and how when they got to Bethlehem none of the inns had any room for them. Tonight we will listen to the story in a warm sanctuary eagerly waiting to light our candles and experience the warm glow that makes Christmas Eve special. For the couple about to give birth to Jesus so long ago, it wasn't that way; it was more like the stress of trying to catch your next flight when yours has been delayed and nobody seems to care. Or like trying to pay your rent when you don't have the money and your landlord is fed up. Or waiting for the system to finally decide that you should receive benefits. That kind of stress... Except when Jesus was born there were no Social Services... It was a harsh, tough world.

Christmas Eve. Did we buy the right presents? Will there be enough under the tree? Will family members get along? Will those who have lost somebody since last Christmas be able to deal with the absence? Of course, we think of the Newtown families, and so many others who have suffered losses. Christmas can be tough.

Christmas Eve. Will it make any real difference this year? *Will* there be any "peace on earth" or "goodwill to all"? Can it be that Jesus will come anew into our hearts this year in such a powerful way that we can see life differently? Personally, and for all of us, I pray so.

Here's a Christmas Eve story:

It was dark outside. And in. Christmas Eve and he felt as rotten as ever, thought Lester. Worse, even. The depression he had been trying to overcome for several months seemed to settle in like a rock. Nothing looked good or even possible. His boss had warned him that a lay-off was coming, but that wasn't the worst thing in his life. He just couldn't seem to get his life together. He loved his wife, but all they did was argue. He didn't mean to be so critical, but he felt critical, of everything.... even God.

God. Why did God let things get so bad? Their son, Dan, was in Afghanistan. Every day, their hearts huddled in fear that Dan would be hurt, or killed. Their other son, Carl, had died this year in a car accident, just as he was driving to his college for his sophomore year. One child was at home, a daughter, Kara, and she was Downs Syndrome.

Christmas. What is there to celebrate, Lester thought bitterly.

He sat there in his almost dark office, feeling almost a nothingness, wondering if he could go on with the heaviness of his life.

A tap on his door broke into his reverie. "Oh, sir, I hope I am not bothering you, but is it all right if I just sweep through your office real quick?" A woman with dark skin and a bent-over body stood there with her cleaning cart.

Lester sat there and shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, come on in. No problem."

The woman quietly moved about the office, carefully getting the dust behind things... Then she spoke, tentatively, "Excuse me, sir, but I wonder: It's Christmas Eve. Why are you here instead of at home or church or a party or something?"

Lester started to cut her off, to say, "That's none of your business," but something in her voice made him want to tell her. "I cannot stand Christmas. It's for children and partygoers and people who have too much money in their wallets. It's not a good season for people with problems."

"I guess you've got your share of those?" the old woman asked. "You don't have enough time for me to tell you all my troubles," Lester said. "We'd be here all night and into the New Year."

The woman chuckled, and then said, "I've got a few of my own, if we started sharing, so we might be here through 2014!"

Lester looked at the woman. Her laughter lightened his spirit, and he laughed, too. She nodded at him, "There you go. See, you can laugh even when things are falling apart. As long as you can do that, you'll be okay. And you know, that's what Christmas is about: laughter in the middle of bad times, light coming in right where things seem the darkest. I know. God has pulled me through many Christmases."

Lester heard the truth in her words. He asked the woman, "What's your name?"

"Ellie Howard." "Well, Ellie, I am Lester Moore. It's strange that you spoke to me tonight... I needed someone to talk to."

"I could tell," said Ellie. "In fact, it's almost every Christmas Eve that God sort of nudges me to speak out to someone.... Ever since I almost killed myself fourteen years ago and God pulled me through, God's been letting me help others in the same way. It helps me see how God works in this world, and it helps the other person, tonight that's you. But I want to warn you, after tonight *you'll* have work to do come Christmas each year, because God will have you looking for folks who need a visit. Now I'll say just one more thing, and then I need to go. Don't let the hard times make you think that God isn't with you. Christmas is for dark times: the Light of God shines brightest when folks are in need of light.... And don't sit here much longer tonight. You have a family, and your family needs you this year more than ever. God told me so. And don't forget to watch for others feeling the way you do now. You'll be asked by God to visit them. Now, you've had your visit. Lester, go have a real Christmas this year."

She pushed her cart out of Lester's office. He sat there, pondering.... Was it really a visit, a visit by someone God had sent to him?? He knew it was. His heart had life. He thought of his family and his fears and his pain, and he got his coat to go home.

God's Light shines in the darkness...

Each year Christians make a journey to the manger of Christmas Eve. Tonight this year's journey ends, but our new journey begins: the journey where we watch for God's Light to shine in the midst of every darkness, and where we look for ways to share Jesus' Light with others whose lives are dark. Jesus is Emmanuel: God is with us. Emmanuel. Light really can shine in any darkness! This is the mystery and the blessing of God's work right here with us and through us, a mystery begun so long ago but just as fresh and life-changing tonight.

May Bethlehem's Light shine in our hearts and find its way through us into the lives of others. Emmanuel. God is with us. Amen.