

THE HOLY NIGHT

A MEDITATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 2:1-20

Is there any night with more tradition, more legend, more stories, more songs written about it that this night, the Holy Night, the night when Christ was born?

Every year, we who stand in pulpits look for ways to make the message fresh and new. And we are probably foolish to do so. Our words, our comments, our explanations, our sermons, our mediations, aren't what people come to church on Christmas Eve to hear.

People come to church on Christmas Eve to hear the old familiar words from Luke's Gospel read. And you notice that tonight I read then from the King James Version, the oldest and most familiar.

People come to sing "Silent Night, Holy Night", and to light a candle, and remember Christmases past, and contemplate the joy of the Christmas that is to be on the morrow.

In the church I served for 26 years, the Christmas Eve service was always the best-attended service of the year. It seems to be true in Marianna as well.

Christmas and Easter are to Christians in the 21st century what Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah are to the Jews: they are our high holy days. For some folks, the high holy days are the only times they enter a house of worship during the year. Some folks might criticize them for that. I do not. If you can't be a Christian, if you can't worship God, on Christmas Eve and Easter morn, there is something wrong with you. If you come to church on the high holy days, to get in touch with what you believe, to reaffirm your faith, there is something right with you.

And for those who come every Sunday, who are there every time the door is open, well, this is the high holy days are the times when you understand why you came all those other times.

This is the Holy Night of the Year of Our Lord 2013. This is the night when we remember that God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son of the father, to come to us as a baby, to live among us as a man, to die on the cross for our sins, to be raised up from the dead for our hope, and to ascend into a heaven where we will dwell with Him eternally.

It isn't just about a baby. It isn't just about His birth. It is about a Savior, about one born to save the people from their sins.

We do two things on this night that are holy, that are special, well, three if you count the singing of Silent Night: first, we will observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion.

It is meet and right that we should do so. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper reminds us of the Incarnation: that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth: that God became a human being with a body like ours, with flesh and muscles and skin and bones and blood like ours. But we don't remember the Incarnation, the Birth of Jesus, most of the time when we break the bread and lift the cup: we say it in the words of institution: that we remember the Lord's death until He comes.

On the Holy Night when we celebrate His birth, we remember His death. We remember why He was born, and we remember why He died: to save us from our sins.

This is the Holy Feast of the People of God, and it is right that on the Holy Night, we observe it.

And then we light a candle. Candle lighting isn't a sacrament. It is something that we do every Sunday, but it isn't even an ordinance of the church. We light the candles on the Communion table every Sunday to remind us of the light of the world coming into the darkness of the world. During Advent, we light the candles of the Advent Wreath, to remember that the light came and is surely coming again. On Christmas Eve, we light the Christ Candle to remember that He is born again in our hearts, that we are born again in our hearts.

The Holy Night is the night when we all light a candle. It is the night when we all share the light. Oh, if we could just take that light out into the darkness of the world, and let it shine!

That is the truth, the mystery of Christmas Eve: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It isn't the light of the candle that shines: it is the light that is in the hearts and minds and souls and lives of the ones who understand that it is indeed better to light one little candle than to curse the darkness.

On the Holy Night, we light our little candle. May that candle's flame kindle in our hearts the love, the hope, the peace, the joy, the love, that the coming of the Christ brings into a world of Darkness and Sin.

Amen and amen.