

A LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

ISAIAH 9:2-7
LUKE 2:1-20

A MEDITATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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Will you pardon me if I reflect and reminisce of Christmas Eves past? I want to talk about some memories, before I forget them.

There was a Christmas more than forty years ago, when gasoline was being rationed. Remember when you could only buy five gallons at a time, and all stations had to close at sunset, and had to be closed on Sunday? In that year of the Arab Oil Embargo, Polly and I were going to travel from where I was preaching in Aberdeen, Mississippi, to Knoxville, Tennessee, to be with our families on Christmas Day. My late brother Robert had ridden the bus down to help me drive on that long ride through the waning hours of Christmas Eve and the early morning of Christmas Day. We had two five gallon gas cans in the trunk, so that we'd have fuel for the trip.

Robert wound up playing Joseph in the live outdoor nativity play, complete with sheep! After the candlelight communion service, we loaded up in a 1965 Oldsmobile Cutlass, and off to Tennessee we headed. Robert never did drive that night, but I do remember him hanging out the window, shining a flashlight on the white line on Interstate 40 in the Cumberland mountains, so thick was the fog. But on that foggy Christmas Eve, a light was shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

A couple of years later, I stood in the pulpit of the Leland Presbyterian Church, in Leland, Mississippi. It was my first time back in the pulpit after surgery for cancer. I was looking ahead at several weeks of radiation treatments. Frankly, things looked pretty dark, that Christmas 40 years ago. But a light was shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

Fast forward a half dozen years, and I was standing in the pulpit of the Montgomery Presbyterian Church of Montgomery, West Virginia, grief stricken over the death of Polly's niece, Melinda, grieving that we had not been able to go home for the funeral of Polly's grandmother, who had died while we were returning from Tennessee to West Virginia after Melinda's service. But a light was shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

Speed ahead with me 20 years, to another Christmas Eve. I wasn't in a pulpit. I was in a hospital bed, in a cardiac care unit, preparing for open heart surgery, a four-way bypass, the day after Christmas. I was upset that I could not be with my congregation on Christmas Eve, that I was going to miss two weddings that were scheduled for the days after Christmas. I remember on that long dark night recording on a tape player specific instructions for my own funeral, down to the hymns I wanted sung and the liturgical dance I wanted performed. But a light was shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

And then there was Christmas Eve of 2011. Newly retired, newly diagnosed with prostate cancer, I had no place to be, nothing to do, no service to lead on Christmas Eve. It was a dark and dreary time. But a light was shining in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

Christmas Eve is the time when we remember not the darkness, not the dark times, but the light that shines in the darkness.

All of the sickness, all of the death, all of the war, all of the disasters, all of the darkness of all of the years is overcome by the light of one little candle.

When we first got a television set, way back in the dark ages of rabbit ears and black and white and test patterns, my aunts got a set before my parents did. We boys would go over to their house, and watch Liberace, and Norman Vincent Peale, and Bishop Fulton Sheen. We would rather have watched Hopalong Cassidy, Flash Gordon, and Superman, but it was their TV and their choice of programming.

Bishop Sheen's show was on opposite Milton Berle. My aunts thought "Uncle Miltie" was trashy and vulgar, so they found Bishop Sheen, on the Dumont Network. His program was called "Life is Worth Living".. I don't remember a whole lot of what Bishop Sheen said, but I do remember the bar or two of music and phrase or two of lyrics that introduced his show, and played it off the air. It was a hit tune in 1952, recorded by Perry Como. Remember him? The song was called *One Little Candle*. About 20 years ago, the group "Chicago" recorded it on a Christmas album. Its words go like this:

It is better to light just one little candle,
Than to stumble in the dark!
Better far that you light just one little candle,
All you need's a tiny spark!

If we'd all say a prayer that the world would be free,
The wonderful dawn of a new day we'll see!
And, if everyone lit just one little candle,
What a bright world this would be!

Let's all light one little candle,
Why stumble on in the dark?
When the day is dark an' dreary,
And your way is hard to find,
Don't let your heart be weary,
Just keep this thought in mind!

It is better to light just one little candle,
Than to stumble in the dark!
Better far that you light just one little candle,
All you need's a tiny spark!

If we'd all say a prayer that the world would be free,
The wonderful dawn of a new day we'll see!
And, if everyone lit just one little candle,
What a bright world this would be!

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Music by George Mysels
with Lyrics by Joseph Maloy Roach, Published 1952

Bishop Sheen's tag line, with which he ended his telecasts, his benediction if you will, was this:

It is better to light just one candle than to curse the darkness.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

No matter how dark the night, the light shines.

So tonight, we each light just one little candle, in the hope that the light of the world will shine.