

Look Well to the Growing Edge

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
December 24, 2009 • Christmas Eve
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.”

Isaiah 9:2

This Advent season I have often wondered if we would ever be ready for Christmas in the Carl-Castle house. Dan and the kids and I travelled over the Thanksgiving holiday and that is the time we usually decorate the house for Christmas. And since the Thanksgiving weekend, with Dan and I both working, it has been hard finding the time and energy to get the Christmas decorations up. For most of Advent, we have looked at lovely unpacked Christmas storage boxes and three Christmas trees with lights, but no ornaments! And having two year old Aydan running around the house has made the task of getting ready for Christmas any easier. But thankfully, we have finally got it done. The house is decorated. The food is gathered in and prepared. The presents are wrapped and under the tree. The house is clean...well sort of! We are ready to welcome Christmas!

These past few days I've been leafing through a Howard Thurman book. Howard Thurman, who died in 1981, was an influential African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. He was Dean of Theology and the chapels at both Howard University and Boston University. He wrote 20 books and in 1944 helped found the first racially integrated, multicultural church in the United States.

In 1973 he published a book called *The Mood of Christmas* and it is that book that I've been leafing through these past few days, and I'm grateful to Barbara Battin who loaned it to me. Thurman has helped me to center my spirit and rest my soul amidst all the business of the season and craziness of a home with both a seven year old and a two year old who have been full of Christmas energy for weeks now.

True to his title, Thurman has got me in the mood for Christmas, with words like the poem on the front of your bulletins:

**The evergreen singing aloud its poem of constant renewal,
The festive mood spreading lilting magic everywhere,
The gifts of recollection calling to heart the graces of life,
The star in the sky calling to mind the wisdom for hope,
The warmth of candlelight glowing against the darkness,
The birth of a child linking past to future,
The symbol of love absorbing all violence.**

THIS IS CHRISTMAS (Howard Thurman, from *The Mood of Christmas*, page 20)

YES! THIS IS CHRISTMAS! Merry Christmas everybody!

For Christians, Christmas Eve is a pinnacle moment. It comes around every year, right on time, whether we are ready or not, and we can mark the hopes and fears of all the years around this particular holy day. Christmas Eve is, after all, the eve of a birthday, but it is also the culmination of the season of darkness, the season of Advent waiting, the time when we should be turning toward the light.

But one thing is for sure, Christmas is never a lighthearted holiday. Everything, whether laughter or tears, sorrow or success, seems to get amplified and magnified in the glow of the Christmas lights. Christmas is as often a time of sadness as it is of joy. We remember and grieve our losses as much as we celebrate the goodness of life and our hope for things to come. We count our losses at Christmas. Remembering the death of a beloved spouse or parent, the pain of divorce or the brokenness of families, the agony of the poor, the dispossessed, the displaced in war torn countries, we can't help being filled with melancholy, even some sadness at Christmas.

The memory of Christmases past is rich but haunting, because it reminds us of time that is gone and those who are no longer with us. For some that live in the shadow of a terminal illness, or the vulnerability of years, there is the painful knowledge that this present Christmas may be their last Christmas. For some of us sitting in the darkness it is difficult to see even a sliver of light.

Underneath all the activity and liveliness of Christmas, lies the quiet question—how are we to understand and cope with the perennial tragedy contained in human history, even in our own stories? The darkness—sin, sickness, sadness, suffering?

Our culture presents us with one story, one scenario of how we can and will triumph over the forces of darkness. The great myth of progress assures us that history is an escalator, and that human ingenuity—science, technology and a robust economy—will eventually save us from poverty, ignorance and suffering—there are tidings of great joy of things to come, just around the corner. No need to worry about all the recent losses in the stock market and home prices, the economy will once again bring prosperity for all. New discoveries in genetics and medical technology will make most diseases a thing of the past and we may even succeed in engineering our way into immortality, or at least doubling our life span. Good news for baby boomers and all the generations to follow! This is the myth of progress: all downs will be followed by ups and all clouds have silver linings and we will live in an alabaster city undimmed by human tears.

But the Christian story has a very different understanding of the tragic dimension of human life. It does not promise an end to suffering or great economic success or the triumph of the forces of light within the horizon of human history. It says there will always be darkness, alienation, injustice, wars and rumors of war and suffering. But it also promises that grace and light sometime enter history at right angles—in ordinary ways—with human face--unexpectedly.

The strange story we celebrate tonight is about a couple of pretty pathetic people...one pregnant teenager, another silently doing what he thought was honorable and decent. They're heading down a lonely road looking for shelter and a place to rest for the night in a place a million miles away from where we are. It's a pretty sorry sight, on a rather quiet, desperate night. And there is no room, no lights of welcome for them, not even at the Bethlehem Motel Six. They are homeless, at least for the night, about to deliver a first-born child, and oh so cold, lonely and hungry they must have been.

Why should we want to hear this story? It has no relevance to us and to our busy modern life. After all,

we can now do all our Christmas shopping from the Internet, we can phone ahead on our cell phones to get a place for the night, most anyone who is pregnant can go to any hospital in the country and, thanks to Medicare, not be turned away. This is a story whose stark simplicity makes us want to yawn and stretch and turn on a football game and maybe drink a beer.

But here we are. We come, in the mystery of a dark night, to hear this story again, because it is what life is about. It's about deep hope born in the human heart, not a casual optimism. It's about sensing glory in the lowest and least among us...not about *ascending* into some utopia, but about *descending* into the sacred struggle of living and knowing that there, right there, we will strength sufficient for all our needs.

As midnight approaches this Christmas Eve, we become aware of a quiet rising like a silent moon singing in the darkness on a cold, stark, star-lit night. Something in the deepest part of us leans into the darkness and sees there goodness ...sees there new life beginning to emerge. The wonder—and mystery—of our faith is that those who walk in darkness *have seen* a great light; that they who dwell in the land of shadows, upon them a light *will shine*.

Howard Thurman writes of the Light in this way, in his poem called *I Will Light Candles this Christmas*:

**Candles of joy, despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all the year long.**

(Howard Thurman, from *The Mood of Christmas*, page 19)

Thurman also writes, in a poem called *The Growing Edge (I did mention that I have been ready Thurman didn't I?)*:

**All around worlds are dying out, new worlds are being born.
All around us life is dying and life is being born:
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms,
green fruit.
Such is the growing edge!
It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And [people] have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of a child – life's most dramatic answer to death –
This the Growing Edge incarnate,
Look well to the growing edge!**

(Howard Thurman, from *The Mood of Christmas*, page 23)

Yes my friends, I'm in the mood for Christmas!

And tonight – this very night -- a new world is being born. In a stable far way. In this very room. The light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world: LOOK WELL TO THE GROWING EDGE!

Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Amen.