

# "In the Darkness"

Isaiah 9:2-7 & Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2005

A little boy and girl were singing their favorite Christmas carol at home one day before Christmas. The boy concluded "Silent Night" with the words, "Sleep in heavenly beans." "No," his sister corrected, "not beans, peas." Ah, a little 'heavenly peas' - that's what we need!

**It** is a beautiful and peaceful thing to sit in the darkness of the church lit by the sparkling light of the "Holiday Tree" - or maybe we dare to call it a "Christmas Tree". Yes, it is a peaceful thing to come to this moment and enjoy the relative darkness of this moment. It is not nearly as pleasant to sit in the darkness of the world in our daily lives. There is hardly any need to explain the many forms the darkness of the world takes or how completely it enfolds us at times - we have all experienced the pain of the human condition. Perhaps there are times when we are just not very understanding of people and situations as that darkness that touches our lives and the lives of those all around us. It is so easy to get lost in our own struggle and pain. I was reminded of some of this darkness and the need to understand when a friend sent me a copy of a prayer that was called the "COMPASSION PRAYER" In part it said this: "Heavenly Father, help us to remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic is a single mother who worked nine hours and is rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.

Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19-year-old college student balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.

Remind us, Lord, that the scary looking bum, begging for money in the same spot every day (who really ought to get a job!) is a slave to addictions that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares.

Help us to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking our shopping progress are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will be the last year that they go shopping together."

There is so much darkness that seems to touch us all - each of us with our own stories. Sometimes I forget. .... It seems to me that it is most sad that we experience some of the darkness most intensely at this time of the year. Too many are alone - too many have experienced great loss - too many live with such pain. And then we add the push and expectations of the season .....

I ran across an article that was called "A Shopper's Psalm" - I rather enjoyed it. In part it said: "I'm weary, Lord. Bone tired. In spite of the fact that my shopping's only half done I need to crash. The crush of the crowd has gotten to me. So, too, the deafening sounds of a pre-Christmas city throbbing with incarnate greed. I need to be reminded that this season's more than plastic Santas, perpetual sales, and Muzak. I need back on the track of reflection. I've derailed, Lord. My emotional fuel is leaking. I'm about to explode. Aren't you glad that we don't have to experience any of that in our peaceful corner of North Dakota? ..... So, we sit for these moments in the darkness of this place - a different kind of darkness - a darkness shattered by the lights of Christmas and the sounds of carols still fresh from our lips and reverberating in our minds.

You understand, of course, that the Christmas story is set in the darkness. By all that the people of that day were experiencing, that night was far from a silent night, holy night. It was a time of suffering by many. The press of the crowds was not caused by long shopping lines hoping to pay for their purchases but forced by a census and the government desire for increased taxation. The people lived under the rule of Rome. Life was not simple and the darkness we know today existed in the same forms in those days. There was plenty of despair, disillusionment and resignation to a less than hopeful existence.

But God had heard the cries of His people. A bright star lit up the darkness. Angels sang! God acted to bring hope and life! Jesus was born! God with us - Emmanuel! And the lights of Christmas began to shine in the darkness. The light of hope twinkled in the night. The light of life destroyed the power of the darkness.

I read about a special holiday show that was put on in New York at the Hayden Planetarium. It began with a giant lollipop tree being projected on the planetarium dome. It was surrounded by a horizon filled with brilliantly colored toys which came to life, dancing to the tune of "Jingle Bells". As the production came to its climax a huge figure of Santa Clause faded out into a scene of falling snow and a snow storm. Then, through the storm, the star of Bethlehem began to shine and the scene gave way to the peaceful beauty of the night sky as it must have been in the dark night around Bethlehem in those days when God placed a star leading to a child born.

I don't know what the intended message was as the designer of that show produced it. But I like the image of all the stuff of the world finally giving way to the light of the Christmas star. There is a great deal of beauty and joy in the toys and trappings of the season and I hope that we can all enjoy the holiday season and give many gifts of love, both physical and emotional, demonstrating our care for each other as we should all year long. And I know that the storms will continue to come even in times of lollipop trees. But ultimately the star of Bethlehem still shines and everything gives way to its hopefulness and light - everything gives way to the gift of life that comes with a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. May you truly feast on 'heavenly peas' this night and thru the year to come.

AMEN

