

In the Darkness

The Rev. Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas Proper I

December 24, 2008; 8 p.m. Service

Christmas began in the darkness.

We often like to forget that fact. After all, human beings tend toward the light. It is no doubt biological and instinctual—our natural body clocks are influenced by daylight, our sense of safety and security relies on being able to see what is around us. Those who have lost their sense of sight know the difficulty of being out of sync with the world around them—a world increasingly reliant on visual images. We as a modern people push back against darkness—we have lamps and lights available 24/7 in our homes, our business, our house of worship, even our cars. When the electricity goes out, we search first for lights—for flashlights, for candles. Somehow, on a very basic level, we know this: dark is scary and not a place we want to be, and light is a place of comfort and safety.

But Christmas came in the darkness.

There was a darkness in the land; the holy land of Israel was now part and parcel of the pagan Roman empire. The Romans had let them keep their customs and faith, it is true; but grudgingly and only as it served their purposes to keep the peace, and make the area easier to govern. It was a time of continuous tension, when at any time circumstances may change and there could be bloodshed or other suffering brought upon the Jewish people. The people's local kings were just as corrupt, only being allowed to rule over their small territories if they stayed in good relationship with Rome. The people perhaps felt that they were exiles—even while they still lived on their own land, a land of deep darkness.

And it was into this darkness that Christ came.

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It was night, in a strange town and in a strange place—a stable. A couple, tired from a journey and unable to find a proper room, and now this: her child to be born in a place away from family, away from friends, away from suitable shelter. No doubt that Mary felt the darkness most keenly as she labored to give birth to her son. She may have been afraid for her own life, the life of her baby. This baby, the son the angel promised would save the world, who would be great and rule over the house of Jacob forever. How could God's son be born here? In a stable, far away from home, in the dark of the night?

But in the dark night, the shepherds kept watch.

The shepherds knew that the night was the time when predators roamed, waiting for an opportune moment to cause chaos and loss to the flock they were charged with overseeing. They were used to the dark, using years of practice and skill to distinguish between a harmless shadow and the presence of real danger. They were silent and unknown sentries, doing a job both necessary and behind the scenes—in the dark, in more ways than one.

And it was into this familiar dark that the angels came—in light, in glory.

We bring you wonderful news, the angels said to shepherds. For into this dark world, a new light shines; a Savior, the Messiah. God has done a new thing, go and see! And suddenly the darkness was overcome by the light of the heavenly host, and that light filled not only the night sky but the souls of the shepherds. Souls that now knew they needed to seek the light, instead of remaining in the familiar darkness. And in seeking it, they found it—lying as an infant in a

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manger, the everlasting light of the world. A light to bring peace and healing, a light that banishes fear and division. Love incarnate, shining forth to conquer souls shrouded in sin and pain.

And they knew that the darkness would rule no more.

And so it is at this time of year, when the days are short, and at this time in our history, when the world can seem like a dark and scary place, that we are asked to remember that first Christmas night—the night when hope flamed alive, and darkness's hold was broken. For God's light, the light of love and peace and hope, entered into the world and changed it forever. And God's light lives still—in a resurrected Christ, in you, in me.

For Christmas began in the darkness—but brought forth the light.

Amen.