

In a year that has challenges like no other in my lifetime, I want to begin this evening by giving you a compliment. You have come. You have come, all ye faithful. And it matters not how. Whether you are here, now and in person, or you have come to worship online, you have come. And that is something for which I give thanks to God.

In my first year of ordained ministry, I still recall some of the wisdom gained from my pastor colleague, Chuck vonFischer. He shared that on Christmas Eve, we have to try to sing nearly all of the songs because we don't want to miss someone's favorite. Of course, there are many favorites and like the book of Psalms in the Bible, they share many insights as well as many emotions. When you chose to come, all ye faithful, did you come feeling "joyful and triumphant?" It seems like a pretty tall order here in 2020 when we are not able to gather in our sanctuary as we would all love to do. But even so, as I said, you have come. In spite of everything, you have come to behold the One who is born the highest, most holy, light of light eternal. It is this child, born of a virgin, in a barn, and laid in a manger, because no one was willing to make room for him.

But you have come because you have heard on high the angels sweetly singing o'er the plains. Or even if you have felt deaf to the angels singing, nevertheless, you have still come to see him whose birth the angels sing. You have come to adore Christ the Lord, the newborn king.

It is remarkable what even a little faith can do. Or sometimes even no faith can do. And part of the good news of this night is that it makes no matter the size or the strength of our faith. Because all of this is a God-thing. He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all, and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall. The good news is that what God is gonna do, God's gonna do. There wasn't any deciding on our part. Out of infinite love, God our Savior chose to live on earth, with the poor and meek and lowly.

Now perhaps you have come joyful and perhaps you feel like joining the triumphs of the skies and with the angelic hosts proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!" And if

that is the case, that is incredible and wonderful and worthy of all kinds of celebration. Of course, if you weren't there when you arrived today, very often we find that in the doing of something, we begin to feel that something. Like how in our story those shepherds had a night that went from ordinary to terrifying to inquisitive to amazement to glorifying and praising God(?), I hope that you also in your harking and beholding and hailing will be able to sing with the shepherds and the angels, "Glory to the newborn king!" And may you also be able to tell it from the mountaintops, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!" Make known what has been told you about this child, lying in the manger, how he rules the world with truth and grace and tell of the wonders of his love.

Yet again, if you just can't summon up all that energy and fanfare, that's okay. Really... no, really! Because for those of us who have lost loved ones recently? And have had to witness how still we see them lie? And for those of us who have not felt like singing *Joy to the World* because we feel too deeply the darkness of our streets? You are going to be okay. Because God has made it so that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. God loves us in the darkness too. After all, God chose to be born among us as a child when it was dark. It is precisely into these settings that we can see how the everlasting light shines. God gathers up the hopes and the fears of all the years and meets us — in this world of sin, not in some fake, overly made-up place — but in this place of honesty, in this world of sin that still the dear Christ enters in.

Now, a second kernel of wisdom from my pastor colleague; and given what I have already shared, this will come as no surprise. I remember him stressing the importance of needing to choose, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, mostly because of this verse:

And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow:
Look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;
Oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!

For some of us, I suspect these words sadly ring true year after year. But in this year? I suspect many of us have come tonight feeling more of life's crushing load than

ever. But the words of this hymn are so reassuring because we only need to look now and rest beside the weary road and we too will be able hear the angels sing. Because

Lo! The days are hast'ning on by prophets seen of old...

When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling

And by God's beautiful gift of the holy infant so tender and mild, all of us throughout the world will give back the song of peace which now the angels sing.

So again, I compliment you and thank you that you have come, to be a part of this silent night, this holy night in whatever way you were able. Because God has come and made a way in the manger so you and I and all of us together can experience love's pure light and have that dawn of redeeming grace shine on us, and in us, and through us. Amen

Christmas Eve Worship in the Barn

Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Jonathan Zielske