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Begin Again with Jesus
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Sunday, December 19, 2021
Nine Lessons and Carols

Nine Lessons on this Festival Sunday. Do you remember how they began?

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

Therein lies the heart of the Christmas story: God’s desire to bring light into a world infused with shadows. This season insists that the night make room for the dawn. Is that not our deepest desire as we head toward Bethlehem – that this one called the Light of the World would pierce the deep gloom of our time?

“And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”
(Genesis 1:5b)

Christmas takes us all the way back to the beginning. It clarifies our faith. We trust, you and I, that the light of God will shine in the bleak places, and despair will not overcome it. That was the intention from the start.

A few days ago, I learned a seminary classmate to whom I am close is nearing the end of his life. As I shared my sadness at the coming loss, another friend said, “Isn’t it something – at this time of year as we move confidently toward the joy and hope of Christmas – to be carrying sorrow?”

It is something, and it has always been like that. That’s why we need incarnation, over and over again – because the real world won’t stop coming at us. What burdens do we carry into Christmas this year? Exhaustion? Anxiety? Helplessness? Anger? Fear? Grief? Shall we say it again: exhaustion – from contending with relentless systems and behaviors working hard to keep some down and tear us all apart?

We bear all of that with us as we approach the manger. That’s the point of this season – not to deny our distress, whatever it might be, but to refuse to let it shut out the light, no matter how faint. So, we start over each year at Christmas, resisting desperate forces that would not allow even a flicker of hope.

This week the scholar and poet bell hooks died. Her writing speaks of love as the greatest form of resistance. “The light of love,” hooks says,

“Is always in us, no matter how cold the flame. It is always present, waiting for the spark to ignite, waiting for the heart to awaken.”

(<https://apple.news/AYyLrUZjmSPaP5NjHN2hDjw>)

That is the conviction of Christmas, that the light will prevail, for it is the light of love.

This second pandemic Christmas invites us to begin again, in a nation where love has gone missing, to welcome the light and carry it boldly into the night.

“Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2b)

To get to Christmas we have a decision to make. Martin Luther King called it deciding for love. In a world overrun by rancor and hatred, we can either decide to put love at the center and be the light, or we can choose to live solely for ourselves and dwell in a land of deep gloom.

The way we are living these days doesn't instill much confidence that our hearts will soon awaken. The easiest path, down which many of us are already headed, leads away from Bethlehem, out into a loveless landscape of fear and isolation and dread. We risk getting to a place that drains any hope for a different world.

Contrast that with the shepherds. They don't hesitate. “Let us go now,” they say. Do they even worry about the sheep? Maybe they leave them with the heavenly host.

“So they went” – with no cynicism or suspicion or guile – “they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.”

They decided to seek the light. With trust and great hope, they made it to Christmas. It changed them. And they returned to their fields, “glorifying and praising God.”

That means they were singing as they went. Maybe Mary had taught them her song:

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn.
(Canticle of the Turning, refrain)

This Christmas let us go singing all the way to Bethlehem, so that we might begin again with Jesus.

Nine lessons, and they begin like this: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

And the light was the glow of love, a mother’s love for a child, and that child’s love for you and me, and for the whole wide world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.