

2nd Opinion: The best place to see the Light is in the dark

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Have you ever wondered why Christmas always seems to be happening at night? Think about it. Do you know of a Christmas card with sun streaming in on the head of baby Jesus?

☒ David Hull Listen to the songs of Christmas that describe the birth of Jesus: “Silent Night, Holy Night,” “O Holy Night,” “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.”

That first verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” sets the scene for Christmas at night:

O little town of Bethlehem,

How still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

The silent stars go by.

Of course, the Bible gives us our understanding of Christmas at night, doesn't it? After all, we read about shepherds who were “keeping watch over their flocks by night” and wise men followed a star at night. I can see why we visualize the birth of Jesus happening at night. But think about it realistically. Night lasts for a few hours, and then dawn comes.

Mary and Joseph did not get right up and leave the stable before the rising sun. They were there in Bethlehem during both day and night. The baby was rocked, fed and wrapped in swaddling clothes both when the sun was shining and when the moon was out.

But we always imagine Christmas at night—as if day never came. Why?

Is it possible we like to keep Christmas at night because we are looking for help in the darkness of our own lives? We long for the hope that comes from the Child who was born in the dark night. We yearn for the prophecy of Isaiah to be fulfilled as we read, “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).

Jesus points the way for us in the darkness

We want this hope that comes in Jesus, the Light of the World. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). Jesus points the way for us in the darkness.

Sometimes, clergy and congregations enter into seasons of darkness. Transitions lead to anxiety, conflict causes pain, crises trouble the heart, decline in clarity of mission and vision can lead to despair, and betrayal destroys relationships. The list could go on. We know about the darkness, don't we?

The message of Advent and Christmas reminds us to seek the Light rather than to curse the darkness. Too often, ministers and churches choose the path of cursing the darkness. “If only ...,” we say. “If only the neighborhood had not changed. ... If only the pastor had not done that. ... If only we had enough money. ... If only that new kind of church had not opened up just around the corner.”

If only. Well, you fill in the blank.

The way to health as congregations is to remember the Christmas gospel we proclaim. Sure, it may be dark now, but the “light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” So, instead of cursing the

darkness, can we find examples of the Light in our churches this year? Where is God piercing through the shroud of darkness with something new and wonderful? Where is the reign of God taking hold in the lives of the people of God? What evidences of God's dream for the world do we see even in the dark places?

We see the light best in the dark

We have put out the Christmas decorations at our home. My job is to take care of the outside work, including all the lights. We have moved to a new city and a new home since last Christmas. So, everything is different. I can't just set things up like I did the last 12 years. I learned again you really can't get the spotlights right until it gets dark. I thought I had them in the right place, but when night fell, I had to make some adjustments.

We see the light best in the dark, don't we? Of course—and that is the wondrously hopeful message of Christmas! So, let's keep singing those words of hope that come next in the carol ...

Yet in thy dark streets shineth

The everlasting Light;

The hopes and fears of all the years

Are met in thee tonight.

Many congregations are living at the intersection of "hopes and fears" right now. It really is pretty dark there. Thanks be to God. That is the best place to see the Light!

David Hull is Southeast coordinator for the Center for Healthy Churches. The center distributed his column.