

December 24, 2018
Christmas Eve (Christmas II)
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 62:6-12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas spending on pets has become big business. Apparently, dollar-wise, millennials lead the pack.¹ Though at least a generation older, I also participate, and so does Santa: tonight he *will* be visiting our two dogs. Utter joy for them is a new soft and squeaky stuffed animal still carrying the mixed aromas of the pet store. We indulge them because we love them ... and because they are so entertaining to watch.

We know how it will go, especially with our ten-pound Chihuahua-mix. She is a literal terror with a new toy. Once she discerns by sight or smell or sound that one is in the house, she transforms into a being possessed, a four-legged laser beam of focused intensity. She must have it! Once obtained, she attacks the poor toy animal's weak point—an eye or a nose or an ear—removing it and creating a small hole. Frantically, she extracts the stuffing and enlarges the hole, thereby rooting out the squeaker. Adversary silenced, she slows down, but she doesn't quit until the newly squeak-less animal is also plush-less. Finally, she lies exhausted upon her conquest amid a cloud of polyester viscera. The formerly cheerful stuffed softie is now a gloomy empty pelt, a comically two-dimensional shell of its formerly vibrant self.

Dog toys aside, there is a point to all this. And it's that so many people I've spoken to recently seem to feel at least a little like an empty pelt. Like a Chihuahua with a stuffed animal, life has a way of emptying us out, of reducing our dimensions, of silencing our squeak. This is the time of year when we tend to feel those effects most keenly. The days are short and the holiday season is complicated—even without the particularly difficult complications that some of us are managing *this* year. As a result, I suspect that most of us over age ten have spent at least a little time recently with the melancholy-inducing ghost of Christmas past. Marley returned to warn us this was coming, but we did our best to ignore him.

Lest we lose hope, it's important to remember this: even if we sometimes feel emptied out, we're not stuffed animals, animated by plastic squeakers and subject to evisceration by terrorizing Chihuahuas. *We* are enlivened by something else, something more powerful, something more permanent.

In the midst of all this, the song that has been going through my head is this:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

That song is in my head, and it's kind of annoying. It's Christmas Eve, and I could be humming any of a number of lovely church carols or even secular songs. Instead I got a summer church camp singalong, one that's actually kind of harsh when you're feeling emptied out. It kind of fits—this *is* the darkest time of the year, and the world needs all the light it can get, including yours and mine. But I have to admit that to me the lyrics always feel a little false and forced. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine? If it feels false and forced, Maybe that's because, for adults, the words voice not so much attainment as aspiration, not so much pronouncement as plea.

It's a plea in two parts. One part is obvious: please God, let my light shine. The second part is less obvious but more foundational: please God, give me certainty that I even *have* a light.

You *do* have a light, you know. You have a light, even though it may not always seem so. Your light is always there, and it can never be extinguished.

Made in God image, humans by the fact of their creation carry the spark of the divine. Humans must have had trouble believing that, because God decided to reinforce the message. Salvation could have come via any number of paths, but God made a choice, and the choice was to effect salvation by coming to us as a fellow human being. God came to us as a fellow human being, and maybe even for selfish reasons: maybe God yearns for us the way we yearn for God. As a point of theological argument, Christianity clarified early on that Jesus was fully divine *and* fully human. God didn't just put on a human pelt for a while; God became a real person, and the human condition became holy.

That fact is easy to forget. This little light of mine, I'm gonna *try to* let it shine. Please God, help me out. Please God, blow on the embers and toss on some coal. Please God, turn the glimmer into a blaze.

Fortunately, every year at this time, just when we need it most, God gives us some extra help. Advent may be the time for emptying out, but Christmas is the time for filling up. If your light is a little dim right now, or if you're wondering whether you still have a light, help is on the way. Jesus is the light of the *world*, and tonight we pause on the cusp of his arrival.

In one small corner of Cajun French country in south Louisiana, there is a unique Christmas Eve tradition said to date back to the late 19th century. Northwest of New Orleans, along the Mississippi River, people build giant bonfires atop the levees. These bonfires begin as large wooden structures. The basic design looks kind of like a pyramid, taller than wide, with ladders for sides. At the corners are tree trunks up to twenty feet tall, with additional logs stretching between them horizontally. Some have fireworks inside. A hundred or more of them are concentrated in just three towns along the river.

Folks spend countless hours assembling these structures; after dark on Christmas Eve, they douse them with flammable hydrocarbons and set them on fire. The conflagrations are visible from miles away and take hours to burn out. Like many traditions in south Louisiana, it's quite colorful and a little over the top. It's also probably completely environmentally irresponsible. Still, one might appreciate the sheer spectacle of it. One might also appreciate its purpose, which is to guide Papa Noel—Father Christmas—Santa Claus—on his way.

Tonight, Jesus is coming, and we are waiting. He's coming no matter what, but a little guiding light wouldn't hurt. Besides on that first Christmas night, God sent a multitude of heavenly hosts to make sure that at least a few people noticed that something special was taking place. It occurs to me that those bonfires are sort of like that, but in reverse. We create a spectacle so that God knows we are waiting.

After communion, we're going to light candles and sing Silent Night. Imagine our candles as symbolic of our inner lights, shining to beckon God here as God is born anew in the world. We're not a bonfire, but we burn brighter together.

You carry the spark of the divine; you possess the light of Christ. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Gerald Porter Jr., "Millennials Plan to Spend Big This Holiday Season—on Their Pets," November 16, 2018, Bloomberg online, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-16/millennials-pony-up-for-pets-as-holiday-shopping-season-beckons> (accessed December 23, 2018).