Christmas Eve 2020

S. Stephen’s, Providence

*“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.”*

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas.

Merry Christmas to each and every one of you this holy night.

We are indeed, I find,

a people who have been walking through a sort of prolonged darkness,

in a year marked by disease and death,

isolation and uncertainty.

But upon us this holy night, a light has indeed shone.

As John writes in the beginning of his Gospel,

the light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not overcome it.

Even our present circumstances cannot diminish this light.

In some ways,

when so much else in our worship life has been stripped away,

we are left to ask ourselves:

What does Christmas really mean?

What is the essential part of Christmas?

Christmas will necessarily mean different things to each of us.

There are different family traditions,

and favorite ways of celebrating.

Now, maybe it’s because I’m a priest,

but for me,

the best part of Christmas is that anticipation and buildup

to the opening notes of “O come, all ye faithful,”

with the organ thundering,

and people singing their hearts out,

“O come, let us adore him.”

We don’t quite have that this year.

Virtual worship is just no replacement for the real thing.

And yet, Christmas has come.

The truth of Christmas has arrived,

and it needed no throngs of people flocking to church,

no bells ringing, nor grand solemn liturgy.

It needed no gifts wrapped and exchanged,

nor a dinner table full of food and guests;

because Christmas is not something we do:

rather, it is a gift given to us by God.

The truth of this night is unchanged and undiminished:

Christ is born,

and born to save,

born to save you and me.

That is what this night is about –

and so for those whose ideas of Christmas

are tied up solely in holiday parties,

gift exchanges,

and large gatherings –

well, this Christmas is going to be very hard.

Don’t get me wrong – none of those things are bad.

I’m missing them too,

and they are important ways of showing our gratitude

for the love we receive from God this night.

But if they’re the things that we put all our stock in,

we will have a very hard time of it this year.

If, however,

we remember what this holy night is really about,

then we will have all we need.

Christ is still born.

God’s love for all of us is still freely given.

We are rescued from sin and death.

This holy child has still come.

The Light of the world enters our darkness,

and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Ironically, as I prepared for tonight’s earlier outdoor service,

the one thing that had me worried and anxious

was the threat of rain.

I don’t know about you,

but in my experience,

it’s hard to keep a tiny candle lit when there’s wind and rain.

And yet, I realized,

not even that could really diminish our celebration.

The light would still persist,

because our eyes have already beheld it.

We already have the image of candlelight stored in our memories,

and God’s light stored in our hearts.

Memory and hope, like God’s light, cannot be extinguished.

We come, drawn together to hear a familiar story,

a story meant to bring us together.

We hear of a man and a pregnant woman,

dealing with circumstances somewhat familiar to us today.

Trying to deal with frustrating government bureaucracy,

all so that taxes can be in order;

an inability of the infrastructure to handle large crowds and their needs:

no room in the Inn …

it could just as easily be not enough COVID tests, or COVID vaccines?

And the reality that human biology doesn’t go on hold

simply because current world events aren’t conducive to childbirth.

No room in the inn or not,

or whether there is a pandemic raging,

a pregnancy still has come to term, she will go into labor,

and the baby will come.

Emmanuel – God-with-us.

And when God does come, in the form of this newborn babe,

as we behold him, we begin to understand the depths of God’s love for us.

For God loved us so much,

that he was willing to become one of us –

not just as a person,

but even as a tiny, helpless child.

All he could receive for a time was love –

all he could want was love –

and all he could give in return was love.

In that regard, he was like every other baby that comes into this world.

However, as we know, he was not.

And so signs open up in the heavens,

and the brightness of God erupts into the dark night,

with angels appearing to shepherds in a field,

announcing to the least and the lowliest,

the lost and forgotten,

that God remembered them,

and had come to deliver them – to save them.

On their darkness a light has shone.

At Christmas – on this holy night –

we remember that Love came down from on high –

the Light of the World shining into our own darkness.

The Light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness could not, cannot, and will not overcome it.

Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light,

and it is glorious to behold.

May it shine forever in our hearts, this night and always.

Amen.