

“One Star is Enough...”

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Christmas Eve - A Service of Lessons and Carols

I welcome you tonight to this most sacred night of the year, Christmas Eve. I know we're here for many different reasons. Some of us love the music and the beauty of the church, a few of us were dragged along by friends and family, and for others, well, you're determined to show up at church once a year whether you need it or not! Yet I would suggest that we're also here because a star, shining like a great mandala above that manger, centuries ago, a sign of wisdom and insight, is inviting us home to our humanity.

And that means we give ourselves to love, regardless of the hatred we find in the world. And we give ourselves to beauty, regardless of the many ways ugliness scars our souls. And we give ourselves to compassion, even in the face of the world's terrible atrocities. And yes, as Wendell Berry reminds us, “We are here tonight determined to live our lives with joy, even though we have carefully considered all the facts!”

It's not that the world suddenly became a better place after that first Christmas. It didn't. But with the birth of that child, God offered a pathway for how to be fully human in such a world. It takes faith and then it takes courage. And it takes living with a radical sense of gratitude, not every now and then but every single day. And it means that we allow ourselves to be pulled into the future, even though everything inside us wants to cling to the past. And it also requires that we find a way to come home to one another, because as we float upon this blue marble that is planet earth, we recognize that we fundamentally need one another.

I discovered a quote by Ram Dass the other day and it has become a mantra for me during this Christmas holiday. He said: “In the end, we are all just trying to walk one another home.” That is such a profound insight, because it suggests that I am not going to make it home without you and you are not going to make it home without me. We need one another.

This past year's presidential election tore our nation apart. Not superficially, but it tore the soul of America apart. Never before in the history of our country have more groups of Americans been demonized in order to win a presidential election. Women were degraded. Mexicans and Hispanics were degraded. Liberals and conservatives were degraded. Muslims were degraded. The LGBT community was degraded. African Americans were degraded. And the fallout from this insidious vitriol is not finished with us yet. But here we are . . . in the soft glow of that natal star . . . and this is our chance to see clearly that we have to find a way to make it together as the human family or we will not make it at all.

It was ten years ago now. I was leaving the Phoenix airport on a flight to Monterey. It was August. Well over a hundred and ten degrees in Phoenix. I had a great seat on the plane. First row. Aisle seat. Perfect. As we lifted off from the ground everyone heard a loud noise, a very loud noise. I looked at the flight attendant and she looked at me, and then she said, “That didn't sound good.” I said, “No it didn't.” The next thing I knew she was on the phone with the cockpit. We had lost part of the landing gear. Which is not a big deal, unless of course you eventually want to land, and then it seems pretty important.

She grabbed a thick book and began reading through emergency procedures. We circled Arizona for 30 minutes while the pilot dumped fuel to lighten the plane. She put us all in emergency positions. And as we prepared for the emergency landing of the plane, flight attendants starting yelling: “Brace. Brace. Brace. Heads down. Brace. Brace. Brace.”

You do a lot of thinking in a moment like that. I thought about my kids. I thought about my church. I thought about what I had done with my life. But let me tell you what I did not think about: I didn’t think about my frequent flyer miles. I didn’t think about how nice it was to be in first class. I didn’t think about how the guy in the first row must be a better person than the guy in the back row. When you’re in a situation like that you quickly learn one of the most important truths of the human experience – we’re either going to make it back to the Phoenix airport together or we’re not going to make it at all.

We did land. Sparks spewed from both sides of the belly of the aircraft when we landed. Emergency vehicles surrounded the runway. CNN was there too. But we landed and we were safe. I would like to report that when I got to the terminal I went to the airport chapel and prayed. I didn’t. I went straight to a bar and ordered a drink. A real drink! But what I’ve never forgotten since that day, and what I am remembering tonight in the light of that Bethlehem star, is that, well in the end we’re all just trying to make sure everyone gets home. Oh, how we need one another this Christmas.

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