

Blue Christmas
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From the Prophet Isaiah: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” In the name of the one Holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.

I am so glad to see you here. Welcome to our Blue Christmas worship. I want to say just a few words about this occasion.

The fact is that the holidays, and especially Christmas, can be a time not of joy, but of bitter memories, the recollection of loss, or deep feelings of alienation from the joy we are told we ought to feel. Some of us may have lost a loved one to death this year and this is the first Christmas with that hole in our lives. Some of us may be dealing with ill health either ourselves or in our families. Some of us may have been raised in homes where Christmas was a time of disagreement, anger, violence, or drunkenness. Some of us may be overwhelmed with sadness or fear at the state of the world, the violence around us, the news of yet another mass shooting or bombing. It is my hope that all may find some peace, solace, or hope as we gather as companions on this the shortest day of the year. Yes, it may be cold and dark, but starting Tuesday the days will grow longer and longer.

The ancient Romans celebrated a winter festival called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, or the day of the birth of the Unconquered Sun. It fell on December 25, which is about the earliest people could start to notice that the days were lengthening. The early Church chose that day to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It was already a day off from work, and it seemed particularly appropriate to celebrate the arrival of the Light of the World.

And appropriate to our purposes this night. For we may experience a darkness in our souls, and yet we know that more light is coming. God comes to bring light to this dark world. God comes to bring peace and joy and new beginnings. We are people of hope.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined virtues as habits that we cultivate by practice. The cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. St. Thomas Aquinas added the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love to the list. According to this wisdom, then, hope is not a feeling that either we have or don't have. Hope is virtue that we cultivate by choosing hope over and over. A colleagues of mine once defined the message of Easter as: "The worst thing is never the last thing." No matter how bad it gets, how great the pain, how devastating the loss, there is always a new chapter, a new beginning, a new dawn.

At the beginning of the 20th century there was an African-American musician and choir director named Thomas A. Dorsey. (He should not be confused with the band leader, Tommy Dorsey.) He lived in Chicago, but was away in St. Louis on a temporary assignment directing a choir there. One day, he received a telegram from Chicago saying that his pregnant wife was very ill. He rushed home, but by the time he got there, both his wife and their unborn child were dead. Mr. Dorsey locked himself in room for days, and his friends were very concerned about his well-being, even fearing that he might hurt himself in his grief and despair. When Mr. Dorsey emerged he had found some peace and he had in his hand a new hymn that was destined to become a favorite not only of the African-American community, but of all Christians. You will hear it sung by Andre Wells and Sarah Melcher right after this homily. It is a song of hope and trust in God in the darkest of times.

This is the point of Christmas. In fact, the first Christmas was not a particularly good time for Joseph and Mary either. The oppressive Roman Government forced them to travel from

Galilee to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax agents. It was a tough journey, in the cold, with Mary very pregnant. When they got to Bethlehem all the motels were full and the best shelter they could find was a stable full of musty hay, animals, and the smell of manure. And then the baby decided to come. No midwife, no running water, nothing clean. Just blood and pain. And then some grubby shepherds show up smelling of dirty sheep and noisy with a tale of angels and bright light and hope. The Christmas message is that God comes to live with us in Jesus. The name Emmanuel means God is with us. Because God takes on human flesh and lives our life, God experiences pain and loss and betrayal, and every woe to which we are subject. Whatever your pain or sorrow or loss may be, God has experienced it, too. God is with us now in whatever pain or loss or woe we may be currently experiencing. And in the end God wins, joy wins, life wins.

Here is a quotation from a man who was kicked out of his home and had to start a new life on a nearly barren island, St. Columba, founder of Iona.¹ He says:

The path I walk, Christ walks it.
 May the land in which I am be without sorrow.
 May the Trinity protect me wherever I stay,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 Bright angels walk with me -- dear presence --
 in every dealing.

May I arrive at every place, may I return home;
 may the way in which I spend be without loss.

¹ "The Protection of Columcille," attributed to Columba. (N.B. Columcille is the Gaelic name; Columba is its Latin Translation. Columcille means "dove of the church," Columba means "dove," and Iona is Hebrew for "dove")

May every path before me be smooth,
man, woman, and child welcome me.

A truly good journey!

Well does the fair Lord show us a course, a path.

So here we are as the sun sets on one of the shortest days of the year, and the long night begins. The dark is upon us, and we will light our candles of hope. We will defy the gloom and practice our hope. We will choose light and hope, and our very choosing will become our path to joy. Our choosing hope will change the world and add to its light. Amen.