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**Christmas Eve ~ December 24, 2007**

**EXPLODING THE UNIVERSE**

*Light and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.* So begins the Book of Common Prayer's "Order of Worship for the Evening," an ancient form of prayer dating to the earliest days of Christianity, with roots in the traditional Jewish blessing of the vesper light and beyond.

Human beings have always been fascinated by light – this mysterious force that we both depend on and fear. Too little light, such as at this time of year in the northern hemisphere, can leave us gloomy and depressed, and who has not watched actors in a scary movie bumping around in the dark and silently begged them to simply turn on the lights so that they can see the lurking danger! On the other hand, too much light, as when a switch is suddenly thrown in a darkened room, can blind us, and even little children learn quickly that fire – the most basic form of light – burns. In earlier times, human beings worshiped light in the form of gods of fire and sun, and all over the world religious rituals have focused on the seasonal increase and diminishing of daylight. In the northern hemisphere, this past Saturday marked the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. A one-time acquaintance of mine, who is a member of a religious sect that does not observe Christmas, used to always give me a hard time around this time of year, sneering that Christmas is just a cop-out on the part of pagan converts who wanted an excuse to keep the debauchery of their annual solstice parties.

Be that as it may, light – and its return after a period of darkness – continues to hold meaning for us as human beings at the most basic levels. Some years ago, my husband and I served as Peace Corps volunteers in the Dominican Republic, where we lived in a rural village that often experienced black-outs for hours and days at a time because of a shortage of fuel for electricity generation. There usually was little warning of a black-out, so we learned to be prepared to interrupt whatever we were doing when the lights went out. Similarly, there was rarely notice when the lights came back on, but, by contrast to the weary resignation that accompanied the black-outs, the "arrival of the light" usually prompted outcries of joy and sudden blasts of meringue music from radios that had not been turned off. I'm reminded of those times when I think of the thousands of Oklahomans who were left in the dark after the recent ice storm, and I can't help but guess that they, like my husband and I, have come to take the blessing of light a little less for granted than they once did.

A few years after my Peace Corps service, my husband and I lived in New York, and I can attest from experience that the lights do not go out on Broadway, or anywhere else, it seems, in that great city. During our time there, we became friends with a woman who, during a messy divorce, decided to spend some time at a church-run retreat center in Connecticut. The night she arrived, as exhausted as she was, she could not sleep and struck on the idea of spending some time in the chapel. All she wanted was to sit quietly in the dark and shut out all the noise and pain of her dying relationship. Despite her fervent intentions, however, she was not to be left to wallow in the dark. The retreat center staff, with an eye toward stewardship and security, had cleverly equipped the chapel with motion-detectors. Yes, if our friend sat very quietly for a few minutes the lights would go out, but the slightest movement on her part triggered the switch and flooded the sanctuary with light. Our friend later told us with a sense of awe-tinged amusement that she finally became so frustrated that she prayed that God would just let her sit in the dark

before she realized that, no, God would *not* just let her sit in the dark. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Or, as the prophet Isaiah might have put it, “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.” We believe, of course, that Isaiah was writing of Jesus the Christ: the God who existed before time; Jesus: the human baby born in Bethlehem some two millennia ago; Jesus: the savior of the world who was, and is, and is to come.

In Isaiah’s time and in keeping with tradition that went back to Moses’ conversation at the burning bush, it would have been unthinkable to give God a proper name. In the passage we heard earlier, Isaiah refers to the long-awaited messiah by the metaphor of “light” and honorifics like “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” but never actually uses God’s name. And for good reason, as we come to see when, in later times, Jesus makes apparently “blasphemous” claims about his identity and authority – claims that carried him to the cross and stand in the way of reconciliation between the three great monotheistic faiths.

No wonder then, that the shepherds, quietly minding the sheep and their business all those years ago, were terrified when the glory of the Lord shone upon them. In the darkness of that night centuries before electricity, the light of the angels surrounding them – a light that we have come to associate with the star that the three Wise Men later followed to Bethlehem – and what they later saw in that stable must have burst upon them like a bomb.

As Madeleine L’Engle, the celebrated Episcopal author of the spiritually based science fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, writes: “The name of God is so awful, so unpronounceable, that it has never been used by any of his creatures. Indeed, it is said that if, inadvertently, the great and terrible name of God should be spoken, the universe would explode.”

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a Belgian priest and scientist began to articulate what has come to be known as the Big Bang theory, the idea that the universe came into being when “a primordial condition of enormous density and temperature” began suddenly to expand. The idea, in more simple language, is that there was literally a great flash of light – a primeval atom exploded, hurling matter in all directions and creating a fireball of such proportions that about 15 billion years later we still are registering its afterglow in the form of cosmic radiation as the universe continues to expand.

My brothers and sisters, tonight is the night that we remember the coming of what the prophet Isaiah aptly, albeit unknowingly, described as “a great light.” And we not only *remember* the coming of that great light, but we call down all the power of the cosmos as we claim that light for ourselves in the form of the incarnate Christ.

In laying claim to that light, I suggest that we participate in the exploding of the universe: the cosmic expansion of God’s love that engulfs us in light and makes possible life itself, a cosmic expansion of love that, like the mind-bending light of the first moments of time, defies understanding and invites us simply to revel in wonder. For in Christ, God has promised never to leave us to wander blind and alone in the icy darkness of space.

May we, like Mary, treasure all these things and ponder them in our hearts. May we, like the shepherds, go forth glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen. And may we, like the people the shepherds told, be utterly amazed tonight and in the darkness of all the nights to come.