



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**God's Wonder Works Best In Our Darkness**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
December 24, 2009 - Christmas Eve

Merry Christmas!

The longer I am a member of this faith community called All Saints Church, Pasadena, the more I have experiences which teach me how much bigger All Saints is than any of us.

Yesterday I received an email from Wales in the United Kingdom. The writer mentioned past disappointments with organized religion, sensing there an absence of compassion toward other human beings. She described the sense of darkness she has been experiencing lately and finding no help from religion. She wrote, "Some of the most religious people I know are the most judgmental discompassionate angry people and I couldn't reconcile this with what I understood of Christianity." In a rather circuitous route she found her way to All Saints via the internet and now she regularly downloads sermons from iTunes. [laughter] She ended the email by saying, "I have a long way to go Rev. Bacon, but I am starting to regain a sense of hope that I thought was gone. I hope you have a very happy Christmas."

We at All Saints have received greetings today from our two new bishop suffragans-elect. Many of you may have heard that the Episcopal diocese of Los Angeles, of which All Saints is a part, elected at the beginning of this month for the first time in its history two women bishops. [applause] They are Diane Bruce and Mary Glasspool. If that were not historic enough, Mary Glasspool is the first openly gay woman elected bishop in the history of the Anglican Communion. [applause] Mary called me today to send to All Saints her love and greetings and to accept my invitation for her to speak here to us as soon as her calendar and Bishop Bruno allow. [laughter]

The other bishop elect, Diane Bruce wrote to complement All Saints in the amazing story that appeared this morning in the Pasadena Weekly. Two weeks ago, we read in this room a scriptural passage in which John the Baptist called for those who have two coats to share with those with no coats. On that Sunday we asked everyone to go home, empty their closets of coats they don't wear and bring them here to the church. A Fourth Century bishop had told his flock, using the same passage of scripture, that those excess coats were "sin coats." We asked worshippers to transform their sin coats into compassion coats. Some worshippers engaged in a very inspiring ripple effect by asking their office colleagues and school friends to join in and as of Monday we had more than 1,000 coats. [applause] Many of them new coats for homeless children, to distribute to shelters and to Dolores Mission in East L.A. Most of the coats have been distributed already. The rest will go to our own Bad Weather Shelter here in Pasadena next week when it opens for the winter. Bishop-elect Diane Bruce wrote this morning, "What an incredible blessing...to those who have given as well as to those who will receive!"

There is one more note I want to sound about the vast ripple effect of our gathering here for prayer and faithful action. I am profoundly moved that at our worship services here at All Saints tonight at both the 8:00 and the 11:00pm, we have more interfaith guests on this Christmas night than in our entire history. To all of you who are here who are our Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist colleagues in promoting a religion that is inclusive and compassionate rather than exclusive and divisive and who are our colleagues in promoting a world of justice, peace, and sustainability, thank you for being here with us tonight. [applause]

We have gathered in this room in the darkness of night for a spectacular celebration of friendship across all boundaries including the boundary between the divine and the human. That very fact, that into the darkest of times God brings the brightest of lights, is why in the year 350 Pope Julius in Rome declared December 25 as the date of Jesus's birth. No one knows when Jesus' factual birthday is but we are not gathered tonight by historic facts as much as by mystical truths. "Pope Julius chose this date to integrate Jesus's birth with a Roman winter solstice festival celebrating the 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun' and turned it into 'the Birthday of the Unconquered Son.'" (Marcus Borg, *The First Christmas*, p. 172).

The importance of darkness as a staging ground for divine action is not an exclusionary truth belonging only to Christianity. Our Muslim friends observe within the Holy Days of Ramadan, "the Night of Power," the anniversary of the night the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the prophet Muhammad. Our Jewish friends gave to the world the prophet and poet, Isaiah, whose words we have read this night,

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.

T. S. Eliot captured the intrinsic sacredness of darkness in his poetry:  
"I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God."

From T.S. Eliot, *EAST COKER*, (No. 2 of 'Four Quartets') III

This night for us is a celebration of how the people of God in many religions, in many places and in many times, have discovered that some of the most transcendent moments of light and enlightenment have occurred in the darkest of nights. In fact the mystics agree that the dark night of the soul is the place where we learn the deepest, most persevering truths about divine love, justice and peace. Were we to poll every person in this room tonight, most of us would report that some of the most important and enduring truths and lessons learned about life were etched into our souls during times of darkness.

As William Sloane Coffin liked to say, "Saints are only sinners who stay the course over the long haul." And all the saints I have ever known knew something was very important – almost sacred – in the dark times of life. I think it was Dr. King who said, it is not until the night comes that the stars

shine. There is something about the dark moments of life that we learn something about who we truly are – as individuals, as faith communities, as a nation, and as the human race.

But Christmas and all the other sacred holy days that commemorate light coming into human darkness are nothing more than decorations and empty rituals unless we participate in the sacredness. Adoration is important to be sure. “Oh, come let us adore him.” But adoration can become an excuse for keeping the status quo if it is not the fuel for participatory transformation. Participation in bringing light into the darkness. Of all the quotations I have repeated as mantras this past year, one of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s statements has been foremost in my heart and mind. He said, “In every moment something sacred is at stake.” But as I have lived with that idea and have repeated it over and over, it has become clear to me that I will totally miss the sacredness of this moment, if I do not participate in it both with awareness and energy.

The celebrations with which I began this sermon were struggles fought fiercely in the halls of church deliberations calling for ACTION on the IDEAS of the equality of women and the inclusion of all people no matter their sexual orientation. The IDEA that there is sacred light to be found in darkness must be acted upon. One of the books I have been reading during Advent is a book called *Saved By a Poem* by Kim Rosen. Rosen speaks in that book of the need to embody poems. Poems beg to be learned by heart, which is very different from memorizing them. That is what we most deeply celebrate tonight – that once upon a time there was a man named Jesus who learned by heart the poem of forgiveness, who embodied the poem of compassion, who embodied the poem of love and inclusion and justice and peace – and he embodied it so fully that his birth as a baby was seen as a wonderful intervention of God’s light into human darkness. And so only being born in the darkest of nights could express the fact that God’s wonder – God’s justice and peace – works most strongly in our darkness.

We celebrate tonight that Jesus embodied the following poem AND that he and all the religions of the world invite you and me to embody the following poem:

a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:2-7)

Now, here is where my interest in religion comes in—I am interested in how you and I can embody this poem. How did Isaiah see that poem embodied in his life? How did Jesus embody that poem? How does a Desmond Tutu, a Martin Luther King, Jr., any transformative saint embody

endless peace that is established and upheld with justice and righteousness? William Sloan Coffin has helped me answer that question. He argues that we begin with understanding that Christmas actually is forgiveness. “Emmanuel means “God with us,” not only to comfort us in tragedy but to forgive us in our sin. Through forgiveness, we are given a fresh start, new hope, a new chance to love...” (William Sloane Coffin, “Joy,” *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin; The Riverside Years, Volume 2*, p. 221f)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu reflected on his life when he led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which to my way of thinking and my theology was in itself a Bethlehem event if there ever was one – an example of light not allowing the darkness to overcome it. Tutu says, “Forgiveness and reconciliation are not just ethereal, spiritual, other-worldly activities. Forgiveness has to do with the real world. Forgiveness and reconciliation are real-politik, because in a very real sense, without forgiveness, there is no future.”

Into our polarized country, after the healthcare reform debate, symbolized by a U.S. Senate dining room that now is usually empty where The New York Times reported recently, senators don’t even go there to break bread with one another any more. Into a world divided by responding to terrorism with war instead of international criminal courts. Into a world of refugee camps. In a world where children are assigned to prison for life in California, the humanitarian and political disaster of Gaza, into all of that comes a baby, a light in the darkness, a call to you and me to embody the poem of peace and justice and compassion, a baby who when he grew up called people to forgive.

During the weeks leading to tonight’s sermon, I was astounded by how forgiveness was in my face. First a member of one of our choirs gave me a documentary on forgiveness, then I interviewed in Chicago a nurse who has written a book on how her clients attain their dreams and goals much more quickly once they become forgiving people, which she describes as removing a boulder from one’s energy flow. Then another documentary producer came up to me right at that place in this church after a gathering in this room and handed me another documentary on forgiveness. Then George Regas, our Rector Emeritus, preached an excellent Advent sermon on forgiveness. Then I decided to read this nurse’s book called *The Law of Forgiveness* and recommended it to a member here who went through the steps of listing all the people he needs to forgive and began to forgive them, writing me the next day that he felt 100 pounds lighter the next morning. Central to my new friend’s book is the *Affirmation to Forgive* of which the ushers have given you a copy.

Consider this—what if in the Christmas event, God was saying to each one of us and to the entire world the words that are on that piece of paper. What if God is saying to you and me tonight “So far as I’m concerned, the incident that happened between us is finished forever.” What if God is saying to you and me tonight, “I wish the best for you. I wish for you your highest good. I hold you in the light.” What is God is saying to you, “All again is well between us. Peace be with you.” What if THAT is what Christmas is really all about? What if THAT is what Christmas is trying to communicate to your heart?

And what if you and I in turn and then the whole world in turn, through this ripple effect, is called to embody the poem of justice and peace and compassion by saying this affirmation to forgive every human being who has ever hurt us? My friend, the nurse from North Carolina, Connie Domino, who wrote the book says you don’t have to contact these people. You don’t have to see them. You don’t have to let down your boundaries of self-protection from them. You don’t even have to like

them. [laughter] But the energy that Desmond Tutu speaks of as “no future without forgiveness,” can literally be unleashed if we will dare to forgive. Everyone. As God forgives us.

I think it is a move of genius to have a poem, “For unto us a child is born,” I think it is a move of genius for the Evangelist Luke to say “You shall find a baby, vulnerable, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a trough where animals get their nurture.”

William Sloane Coffin imagines one of the shepherds leaning over the manger that night and Mother Mary picking the baby up and handing it to that shepherd, saying, “Would you hold him for me for just a minute?” and he imagines how disarming that would be.

So with only a half-hearted apology I want to close with a story about our grandchildren. [laughter] Sarah, 6 and Luke, 2, who are at our home for the holidays. Because all of our family is together under one roof, our grandchildren are having to sleep in my study at home on air mattresses. This is the room where I pray every morning. This morning, I was up at 5:00 am to pray. I tiptoed in, sat in my chair, put my feet on the ottoman and covered myself with a prayer shawl knit by the Prayer Shawl Ministry here at All Saints. After about an hour of prayer and contemplation, I heard my grandchildren stirring. They tiptoed over to me and climbed up in my lap, bringing their own blankies and I was there with my blankie. Each kissed me, and said, “Good morning, ‘Bapu’ (their name for me).” Luke, the 2 year old said, “This is my Bapu.” And they were perfectly still for 15 minutes with their heads resting on my chest, and then they went to get in bed with my wife, their “Hoppie.”

I was totally disarmed in the darkness of the night. What if the child, the babe, born this night is calling you to disarmament, is calling religion to disarmament, calling our country to be disarmed of nuclear weapons, drones, warfare, occupation, oppression, discrimination, injustice and all forms of violence?

I am convinced my friends, that it has to begin with us, with our forgiving all whom we hold in unforgiveness.

So after this, the last paragraph of my sermon, we are going to observe 2 minutes of silence, before the Senior Warden begins the prayers of the people. Will you take that Affirmation to Forgive sheet, and will you bring to mind someone you need to forgive? Now, the energy works only if before you say the Forgiveness Affirmation that you hold that person in your imagination in the same light of love and affection that God holds them in—that’s the hardest part—and then say in silence that Affirmation to Forgive about that person. This Christmas night, in the darkness of this night, give yourself a Christmas present—the gift of forgiveness of another person. Embody God’s poem of forgiveness. Use the adoration of this celebration of the Nativity as fuel for your becoming a transformative instrument of God’s bringing light into not only your darkness but into the darkness of this entire world.

Amen.

Affirmation to Forgive: I forgive you completely and freely, I release you and let you go. So far as I’m concerned, the incident that happened between us is finished forever. I wish the best for you. I wish for you your highest good. I hold you in the light. I am free and you are free, and all again is well between us. Peace be with you. (Connie Domino, *The Law of Forgiveness*)