

Candles in the balcony (Isaiah 9:2-7)

I understand the people who only show up once a year, just to hold a candle of their own.

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When I was a middle-school girl in Virginia, with a Baptist mother and a Methodist father, I would pester my dad to take me to the late Christmas Eve service at his church just for the candles.

Worshippers on Christmas Eve consist of some mixture of the excited faithful, the bored near-relatives, and the dreamy mystery-lovers. The first have particular moments they anticipate: the choir's descant on "O Come, All Ye Faithful," or the youngster who reads the passage from Luke that we also hear in Linus's voice. The second may listen long enough to laugh at a funny story, if it comes early in the pastor's remarks. But the last are waiting only for the chandeliers to be dimmed, the rising and falling of "Silent Night," and the spread of candlelight through the sanctuary.

Isaiah assures us that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Whether you gather to worship on Christmas Eve in the kind of idyllic country church I last served in Maine, or in the desert Southwest, or even in the Southern Hemisphere, by midnight it is dark outside. Whether we think about what this light means or not, somehow a live flame can elicit something we don't get from pageants or preaching or popular Christmas songs.

I remember feeling so grown-up, holding my candle, watching the flame flicker. I remember it better than anything else, although I am sure the music was lovely, the lessons well-read, and the preaching sound. We always sat in the balcony, and the view of all those lights! Well, I am telling you the truth when I say I understand the people who show up only for that one service, just to hold a candle of their own.

The thing I loved most about Christmas Eve at my dad's church was this: at the end of the service we carried our lit candles down a curving staircase from the balcony and joined the rest of the congregation moving through the vestibule to reassemble on the city sidewalk. I know now it must have been a fire hazard.

Isaiah prophesies a fire consuming the accoutrements of war, the breaking of the oppressor's rod, and the end of enslavement. He is a prophet proclaiming the possibility of real change in the world. Let's not be too quick to draw up some psycho-spiritual metaphor about habits that enchant us, or to supersize our challenges. Let's take a moment while the light spreads around to realize what oppression looks like here and now and confess our part in it. Let's take those moments of swelling organ or gentle guitar to make our commitment to Jesus Christ, and the authority that rests on his shoulders to bring about God's justice, righteousness, and peace.

Let's bring the Christ light into the world.