

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, oh God. Amen.

"I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being." This is one of my favorite lines of poetry written by the Persian Sufi poet, Hafez.

Did you know that your own being is an astonishing light? Many, if not most of us, don't really know this. We aren't living with a daily awareness of the miracle of our own existence and the astonishing light that we're each bringing into the world. This evening, we're coming together to behold and welcome the astonishing light of Christ that entered into the world in the form of a newborn baby as the person of Jesus centuries ago. And we're celebrating the good news that God has entered into our collective humanity, uniting us all in divine love.

As one translation of John's Gospel says, "Everything was created through the mystery of Christ. Nothing, not one thing came into being without Christ." Yet, just as we don't always recognize our own astonishing light, we don't always recognize Christ's light coming into the world and being present to us in all of creation.

As we see in our gospel narrative, even though Jesus's light had been long anticipated and awaited, he didn't have a very welcoming beginning. When Mary was pregnant, Joseph and she had to leave their home in Nazareth and journey to a city called Bethlehem, the home of Joseph's ancestral lineage, for a census. And this couldn't have been comfortable. Most of our images depict a very pregnant Mary on a small donkey, over desert terrain and rocky ground.

And when they finally arrived, there wasn't any room for them at the inn because of all the other people who had traveled to Bethlehem to also be counted as part of their family's census. So, Mary and Joseph spent the night in the inn's manger, or stable, where Mary gave birth to Jesus, the complete incarnation of the light of Christ, under unexpected and less than preferable conditions.

The path hadn't been comfortable or easy, and there hadn't been any place for Jesus and his family, but a way was made. And it didn't have to be under ideal circumstances for Jesus's light to enter into the world and fulfill its purpose.

One of the ways we can lose sight of the astonishing light of our own beings is through believing there isn't a place for us in this world. You may believe you don't really belong here, or that your light isn't really needed, or even if it is, it won't be welcomed and received, so why risk the vulnerability? You may believe that conditions in your life are too difficult and complicated to live into the fullness of who God created you to be. There may be reasons you can't bring your unique gifts into the world. Reasons to not push through the difficulty and discomfort required to set out on your own arduous and unknown journey.

But the truth is that you do belong here, and it is worth risking everything to bring your unique and particular light of Christ into the world. And everything you have been through, every challenge, every less-than-ideal circumstance, every moment of darkness that has made your path unclear, is the fodder that will make your life and your light shine brighter.

Another way we can lose sight of the astonishing light of our own beings is through thinking we are alone and lost in darkness. But if the darkness can make our light shine brighter, maybe we need to think about it a little differently. Maybe instead of being a place of loneliness and isolation, even the darkness belongs and serves a purpose.

I recently went on a personal retreat in Julian, the small mountain town in San Diego County that we all know and love for their pies. And I stayed at Camp Stevens, which is part of the Episcopal diocese, and the camp was on their winter break, so I only saw a couple of people on staff, in passing while I was there. During the day, I enjoyed my beautiful mountain views being surrounded by trees, immersed in nature and all of the silence. And at night I went outside to look at the stars.

So, I decided to venture down the dirt path where the sky was darker. And as I got further away from the light of my cabin, I started wondering if this was a good idea. The path got gravelly, and I didn't feel as confident in my footing. The same path I had walked throughout the day now seemed precarious and scary in darkness.

I suddenly remembered that being immersed in nature meant I was among wild animals, and I wondered if any were going to cross my path, and I hoped that they would be friendly. I began walking much slower and listening more attentively. I felt my way through each step, making sure it was secure and, in my uncertainty, I felt more aware of God's presence in and with me. I realized how grateful I was for the light of the stars puncturing through the canopy of night sky, stars that are normally hidden by the bright lights of the city that I live in.

So, while I'm not encouraging everyone to walk around in the mountains by yourself at night, I do think the darkness has important things to teach us, that we need to learn to not fear, but embrace.

In the darkness, we have to slow down and become more attentive. We learn how to heighten our senses. We learn to turn to God instead of the many people and resources that are always available to us.

The darkness is a place where we aren't distracted by all the things we see in our environment, so we can notice the more subtle signs of guidance we have been missing in the brightness and busyness of our lives. We're pushed to turn more inward and draw on our own inner light only to discover just how astonishing it really is.

As our poet Hafez said, "I wish I could show you when you're lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being." So, this Christmas Eve, as we welcome the light of Christ into the world, may you know that you too are an astonishing light. May you know that you are fulfilling a unique purpose. You belong in this world at this time. Your presence matters and is needed. May you know in

the core of your being that you are never really alone or lost in darkness because even the darkness belongs and serves a purpose. Even the darkness has gifts hidden within it. And may your own inner light shine brighter with the coming of Christ. May it illuminate God's presence in others and in all of creation, uniting us all in love.

Amen.