

“The Light of Christmas”
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One of my favorite things about the Christmas season is all the lights. To be sure, church is at the heart of the season. I love the hymns and all the special music and the liturgies and the Biblical stories and prophecies, but I also love Christmas lights. Our first Christmas in Charlotte, we went for a walk in the neighborhood to see how people had decorated their homes. We strolled down Sterling, then across Westfield, then we came to Hillside. Oh my goodness! We knew nothing of their beautiful Christmas tradition, but it took our breath away—a winter wonderland. I’ve never seen so many Christmas balls, handmade with chicken wire and lights hanging from all the trees. Remarkable. Our own John and Pender Hollmeyer played a key role in starting that tradition back in 2006. Pender grew up in Greensboro in the Fisher Park Neighborhood. That whole neighborhood looks like Hillside Dr. At the urging of her Dad, she and John brought that tradition here. Now it has grown into one of the best decorated streets in our community. And for a great cause! All who enjoy the lights are invited to make an offering to Loaves and Fishes. Other streets have their own traditions; the beautiful red and white striped trees on Providence, and all the wrapped trees on Hampton. It’s been a beautiful season of lights in the neighborhood.

Of course our culture has a way of taking all good things a bit too far. This has happened even with Christmas lights. Channel surfing one night a couple weeks ago I came across a show entitled, “The Great Christmas Light Fight.” In each one-hour episode, four families compete to win \$50,000 and the coveted, “Light Fight” trophy. The episode I caught was not your average family home light display. It was “The Heavyweight” episode.¹ The winner was “Magical Winter Lights” outside of Houston, Texas. Inspired by Chinese Lantern festivals, the display includes over six million lights, a 60-ft. light tree and “The Dino,” a display of illumined animatronic dinosaurs. Nothing says, “Merry Christmas” quite like a 35 ft. illumined animatronic T-Rex. You can visit “Magical Winter Lights” for \$76 for a “Family-four pack.”²

That’s what our culture tends to do to Christmas. Of course the light of Christmas is not born of anything humans create. The light of Christmas is not a flashy light seeking to draw attention to itself for its own sake. It’s certainly not like anything you’d see on the Great Christmas Light Fight. The light of Christmas is not created by us, but by God. The light of Christmas is the glory of the Lord shining around shepherds keeping watch in the fields over their flocks by night. “Glories stream from heaven afar,” as the hymn we will sing in a moment puts it. The light of Christmas is the glow of that baby’s face; “radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace.” The light of Christmas is a mysterious star moving across the heavens directing foreign kings to a home in the remote Judean village of Bethlehem— “Wondrous star, lend thy light.” In the light of that star of Bethlehem, like the star adorning our sanctuary, we cannot help but see the cross. Even the cross reflects the light of Christmas for the cross shows us the depth of God’s love for the world— “Son of God, love’s pure light.” This is the light of Christmas.

¹ See: <https://abc.com/shows/the-great-christmas-light-fight/video/most-recent/vdka14951431>

² See: <https://magicalwinterlights.com/>

Yesterday we lost power at the church. A large oak tree was down on Radcliffe by Queens Road West, taking out electricity for many in the area. We got an alert at 8:00 AM that the power would be back on by 10:45, then it became noon, then it became 10:00 PM last night. That's not exactly what a church hopes to hear the day before our largest worship services of the year! I found myself wondering—what if there's no power on Christmas Eve? There'll be no sound amplification for worship. No organ music filling the sanctuary. No HVAC to keep things comfortable. What would become of our Christmas Eve Service? Then I realized it really didn't matter. The light of Christmas does not depend on all that. All we need to reflect the light of Christmas are candles. Candles reflect that light so much better than anything powered by electricity. One candle shining in the darkness changes everything.

Ultimately, the light of Christmas doesn't even depend on a candle. I've shared with you before the story of a Christmas Eve service in Sing Sing Prison.³ Hans Hallundbaek is a Commissioned Lay Pastor in the Hudson River Presbytery. He visits Sing Sing as part of his ministry. As he described, "Christmas in prison is not Christmas. There are no celebrations, no gifts...no caroling, no festive meals ...For those incarcerated, it is just one of those endless days slowly counting away your sentence."

Hans continues, "The first time I joined such a Christmas Eve service of hymn singing and prayers at Sing Sing ..., I was overwhelmed by the experience. ... After delivering my prepared message, I realized there were no candles in the room, so I said, 'Let us, in closing, light a candle to remember the light of Christ being born into the world tonight.' One of the men responded, 'Pastor, are you crazy? This is a maximum security prison. Candles are contraband here.'" Hans responded, "My candle is different. It's a virtual candle...a candle you can see only in your mind's eye."⁴

Then he reached into his bag and pulled out an imaginary candle, carefully placed it on the table, and pulled out some virtual matches. A man named Tony came forward to light it. As Hans describes, "This roomful of men, hardened by years and decades in prison, quickly embraced the moment. I could almost see the candle flame reflected in their eyes. It was totally still ...as [they] remembered the experience of live candles that they had not seen for years. After a brief reflection on the Eleanor Roosevelt quote, 'It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness,' I prepared to leave as the prison guard arrived to guide me out.

"Then someone from the third row shouted, 'What about the candle?' 'Just blow it out,' said another. "No!" came a booming voice from the back of the room. It was Jerome, a big, strong man facing a 45-year sentence. "Please, please never blow out that candle," he pleaded in a trembling voice, "I want it to stay lit, so that every time I enter this room I can see hope." "Last I checked," Hans tells us, "that virtual candle is still shining brightly in the Sing Sing Chapel."

Beloved, nothing on earth compares to the light of Christmas. Nothing on earth can extinguish it. For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it. "You are the light of the world," says our Lord, "Let your light so shine before all people," that when they see you, they see hope. Please, please never blow out the light that shines forth in you this night. God knows, the world needs it. Amen.

³ Hans Hallundbaek, "Christmas in Prison," December 20, 2017. See <https://nextchurch.net/christmas-in-prison/>

⁴ Ibid.