

Midnight stillness

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



On Christmas Eve, there always comes a time when everything is finally still. Once all the preparations and decorations, extra choir rehearsals and Christmas pageants, shopping and holiday parties have been completed, peace descends.

For me, that time always came after the 11 p.m. candlelight service. After the congregation went home, after I turned off the lights and locked the doors, as my daughters and I drove home through the dark and quiet streets, I would then settle into silence. Once home and after my husband and children went to bed, I could continue in that Christmas Eve stillness and reflect on the mystery of Advent and Christmas.

Advent—a season of expectation. God is up to something. We are urged to watch and wait. “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9). “At midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’” (Matthew 25:6).

There are Advent calendars, with each opened window drawing one closer to Christmas. Advent wreaths light the way. In Cleveland in the late ’50s and early ’60s, every child would rush home from school to catch Mr. Jingeling on TV. (Trust me, every Clevelander of a certain age can sing the Mr. Jingeling song.)

Advent is our time and is filled with longing—for peace, for a just world, for restored relationships, for God. The Advent lessons from the prophet Isaiah are filled with the sorrow of exile and the persistent hope that God still cares for God’s people and will bring about their return to Israel. We sing, “Come, thou


long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 254).

And come Jesus does, into our world and into our lives. For a brief time, generosity and goodwill break out. We wish strangers a “Merry Christmas.” We even practice a little patience in traffic and with relatives. Life is filled with possibility.

I think about all these things in the midnight stillness of Christmas Eve. I consider the miracle of the incarnation—that God is ever faithful; that God is not far off but is Emmanuel, God with us; that in Jesus the Divine set aside all glory in order to take on our nature and be truly glorified on the cross. A helpless baby in a wooden manger, a broken man on a cross—these are the gifts of Christmas.

The Christmas carol declares that the angels’ announcement to the shepherds “came upon the midnight clear” (*ELW*, 282). All of creation became the land of the midnight Son. The good earth and all its creatures, sun and moon, and stars and planets orbit in harmony around this center of love.

In the stillness, I think of another midnight—the Easter Vigil. It is the first celebration of the resurrection. In the vigil these words of the Exsultet (Easter proclamation) are sung: “This is the night when Christ, the Life, rose from the dead. The seal of the grave is broken and the morning of a new creation breaks forth out of night.” All Advent expectations and longings are met and exceeded. The ephemeral peace and hope we may feel at Christmas take substance and permanence. God’s promise has been fulfilled.

There is a lot for the Christ child to do before the work on earth is done. Jesus will grow into adulthood. He will teach and feed and heal. Jesus will suffer the betrayal of his friends and will die that we might live. I think about this on Christmas Eve and pray, “Rest now, dear midnight Son.” 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address is: bishop@elca.org. This column originally appeared in *Living Lutheran’s* December issue. Reprinted with permission.