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## Light in the Dark

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Winter Solstice, December 21, 2017  
St. Stephen's Blue Christmas Service, Luke 1:68-79*

There is an elderly British woman whose original name was Diane Perry. From a very early age she saw things differently than most other people. She eventually became the first western Buddhist nun named Tenzin Palmo, but her biography tells the story of how she always felt out of place growing up. In fact as a teenager, she had a profound experience of sitting at the bus stop in London, and looking all around her, and realizing that everyone she saw was eventually going to grow old and get sick and die, yet they were all laughing and chatting and acting like this wasn't true, and it seemed to her like they were all crazy.<sup>1</sup> So obviously, Diane Perry was really fun to have at parties.

But for all of us, if we live long enough, we have those moments in time when we come deeply in touch with suffering, whether it be our own or the suffering of others, yet the world carries on around us as if nothing has happened—and at those times it can feel like either we or the world around us is crazy. And there is no time when that difference is more acute than Christmas. Since practically the first day in October, Christmas decorations have been going up in the stores. You can hear Christmas carols everywhere. Some people have gone into a retail frenzy of buying presents and having holiday parties and making their lists and checking them twice. There is nothing wrong with all of that – it can be wonderful. And yet, all this time, the light is decreasing every day. The wheel of the year is turning toward the dark. And, perhaps invisibly, there are many of us, especially those of us gathered here tonight, who have experienced loss or grief, and the dissonance

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<sup>1</sup> Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow*.

is jarring and painful. Some of us have lost loved ones, and we feel their absence more keenly than any of the physical things actually present to us. Some of us have experienced other kinds of loss, the loss of a job or a dream or health. Some of us have experienced family crisis that makes us anxious for the future of our loved ones. Some agonize over the prejudice and violence we see in our country and abroad. And here we sit, and the sleigh bells are jingling and the Santa's are ho-ho-ing and Mary is pregnant, and where in this picture do we fit?

Some of you know that I had four miscarriages, two of them during the season of Advent. I remember sitting at home thinking that I didn't know if I could bear coming to church, during Advent, where I knew I would see and hear talk of pregnant Mary everywhere I went. But then I began listening to the details of the story. I saw that Mary was not at all a young woman in her twenties who had gotten married to her college sweetheart and whose friends and families were competing to give her baby showers. Mary's pregnancy was a matter of public shame. Mary was not selecting between the best hospitals at which she might give birth to her son. In fact she and Joseph were turned away, wherever they went, even though she was big with child and possibly in labor, and she ended up giving birth to her son in a barn with the animals.

And as I immersed myself in the details of the story, what I began to feel, not as head knowledge but as an inner experience, was that the story of Jesus has never been cute and retail, our Christmas pageant notwithstanding. The story of Jesus has always been about light in the dark. The scripture our Deacon Diane read so beautifully says that for those who are sitting in darkness, living in the shadow of death, we who are living with grief as the ocean we are swimming in, the light dawns. The light dawns in the form of God-With-Us, in the form of the God who takes human form in utter helplessness in order to be in solidarity with us in our pain. The light dawns because even though grief is profoundly isolating, we discover that here in the dark, closer than our own heartbeats or our own breath, is Emmanuel, God-With-Us, waiting in the dark with us. And in recognizing that compassionate presence, the light dawns and brings us the possibility of peace and healing. If Emmanuel means anything to us, it means that peace and healing are

truly possible, even if they don't come quickly and even though we, like Jesus, continue to bear our scars. Peace and healing begin with light in the dark, the light of the compassionate and unconditional presence of God-With-Us.

As much as I love ringing bells and feasts and Christmas wreaths, I affirm that the true expression of Christmas is exactly here, tonight, on the winter solstice, the darkest day of the year. We gather, not to deny but to name and acknowledge the losses and fear and isolation we have experienced. Here we are together, in the dark. And within us, and among us, and beyond us, Christ is coming. Once again, we can experience creation being made new: today, and each day that is always a beginning, God is saying, Let there be light.