

Christmas Eve Meditation 2018

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Beyond habit, there is a reason for the Christmas decorations. There are several reasons, in fact. The crèche provides a teachable moment for the young and the young at heart. It assembles in one place the principals in the nativity story – Mary, Joseph, baby, shepherds – and it elevates the sheep and the cattle from their very minor background roles, and it's always nice to be kind to animals.

There are lessons attached to the other decorations, as well – the candles, the wreaths, the evergreens, the Chrismons – so there's plenty to be learned for those who wish to explore.

But teaching is only one purpose of the decorations, and it's not the most important purpose. Another, greater reason for the once-a-year display is to help us leave behind, for just a little while, the world that is not beautifully adorned.

I grew up not far from an amusement park called Santa Claus Land – since renamed Holiday World – where it was Christmas all year round. It was also a fantasy world and not where you got to spend more time than your price of admission bought you. After a few hours with the elves and the live reindeer and the child-sized train that carried children around the park's perimeter, it was time to go home, back to the real world of less color, less amusement, less joy.

And soon enough, we, too, will take our leave of this service and these decorations, and return to that world where poverty is grinding rather than stoically depicted by wooden figurines; where work is tedious and demanding rather than tranquil with friendly sheep under a starlit sky; and where the search for clean diapers is more urgent and more regular than the adoring parent's gaze.

That's the real world that most of us inhabit most of the time. And it's not all bad; there's quite a lot of love and delight and beauty and peace in it, and we treasure those moments, as few or as many as they might be.

But here in this place, for the few moments of being swaddled in Christmas decorations, we leave that other world out there. It'll be fine without us for a little while. We're not going to abandon it or our calling to serve it for long – just long enough to be reminded that the ordinary world is not the only world there is. What we create here, with candlelight and greenery, with bell, book, and song, is an oasis – not of fantasy, like Santa Claus Land, but of aspiration. We create services on Christmas Eve with our aspirational selves. We aspire to a world where all is calm and all is bright, as we'll sing in the closing carol. And in bits and pieces, as that hymn reminds us, we create that world in the face of the conflict and chaos of clashing egos and ideologies. When the Germans sang "Stille Nacht" from their trenches and the Allies sang "Silent Night" from their trenches during the Christmas Eve ceasefire of 1914, that aspirational world appeared, through human effort cooperating with the Holy Spirit, even amidst the horror and tragedy of a senseless war.

And it is perhaps not accidental that one of the most famous and most beautiful Christmas Eve services in the world – the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols of King's College, Cambridge – was designed and instituted in 1918 by Eric Milner-White, who had served as a chaplain in that grotesque and senseless war.

That's the world – the real, often grotesque and often senseless world – that services like this one come from. In the final analysis, what we say or do here this evening will matter far less than the fact of our presence here. Of all ministries, the ministry of presence is the most vital and powerful and comforting. Everything else is secondary.

We have come here to bear witness to the light in a deeply shadowed world. When a sign saying "Hate Has No Home Here" generates an angry backlash – as it did recently when it was posted by a health care provider in a Medina clinic – we are living in a deeply shadowed world. In such a world as that, we need to gather in places like this, where hate also has no home, and form a circle of flickering candlelight at the end to symbolize the witness we bear to the ancient light – the light that came into the world far earlier than electricity and will still be here when the last light bulb has gone out. The world we live in is temporary; the world we represent is eternal.

So enjoy the greenery, the carols, the lessons, and the prayers. Enjoy the companionship of those aspiring to better selves and thence to a better world. Enjoy it while you may and take it with you if you can. The beauty of holiness is never diminished by being shared. A blessed Christmas to you all.