

CHRISTMAS EVE 2016

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Several weeks ago a friend shared that everywhere he turned, whether on the news or in personal his interactions, he was seeing people struggling with some combination of fear, hurt, anger, and anxiety. As his awareness grew, he began praying for all those suffering in that way, that by the grace of God they would be freed to fully receive our Lord with peace and joy at Christmas. I was happy to join him in that prayer, and now that Advent is coming to an end, I think our next step is to make sure that we fully receive him in our own Christmas celebrations.

Fully receiving Jesus means more than just exchanging gifts and spending time with the people you love. Those are great blessings and we should treasure them, but by themselves they don't bring deep or lasting change to our lives. Eventually their effects fade, and things tend to go back to the way they were, and that's not at all the way Isaiah (Is 9:2-6) and Luke (Luke 2:1-20) describe the Messiah's arrival. Light shines on those living in deep darkness. Fear is cast out and the people are freed from burdens and oppression. The joy of the people is multiplied and they praise and glorify God. The birth of Jesus transforms everything when we experience it not as an event, but as the invitation to share our whole lives with him.

This is our next step because as we share our lives with Jesus we ourselves become an invitation to others, like the shepherds in Luke's gospel. Having received this "good news of great joy," they leave the wilderness and go with haste to see Jesus for themselves and share what they've seen and heard. Then, even though they return to their flocks, they go back praising and glorifying God, the message still on their lips.

As we prepare to receive our Lord, think about what in your life needs to be transformed by his coming, and set expectations high enough that Isaiah and Luke wouldn't be disappointed. We need to see Jesus for ourselves – not secondhand, but in our own lives. We have to become that invitation, because that's exactly what so many who are living in darkness or wandering in the wilderness desperately need – to hear a message of hope and see that it's real.

December 24, 2016