

A Story: "And the Light Comprehended It Not"
The Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – Dec. 26, 2021

Please Read:
Psalm 148
Isaiah 9:2b, 6-7
Colossians 3:12-17
John 1:1-14

Last Tuesday was the Winter Solstice, the day when we, in the Northern Hemisphere experience the shortest day of the year, the day with the least amount of sunlight and the greatest amount of darkness. It is no coincidence that Christians long ago chose to celebrate Christ's birth in this season of great darkness, for the Solstice marks the beginning of lengthening days, the return of the sun. We claim Christ as the Light of the World, so with his birth we welcome the coming of that Light.

But darkness comes in many forms, not just the literal lack of light. We know about the darkness of severe illness or grief, the darkness of broken or lost relationships, the darkness we have experienced as the Covid pandemic has dragged on, the darkness that comes when the future seems to hold no hope. Today's story is about such darkness and the light that overcame it. It is a true story told by Willem Brandt. He writes...

... This is not really a Christmas story, [but] a report, quite an ordinary account of something that happened somewhere. Even so, it lacks the timeliness characteristic of a report, for it happened more than [seventy] years ago. Who cares about that now? Still, after all, the Christmas story, the *real* one, was also not just-a-story -- it too is old news of some two thousand years! So what do a mere few decades matter? Moreover, there is another curious similarity, though you may, perhaps, think this a bit strained. The old Christmas story had its setting in a stable. That which occurred more than [seventy] years ago also took place in a stable. Not an actual stable, but it looked very much like one. It was a dismal shack where darkness prevailed almost permanently. But outdoors, the light shone sharply and gloriously, both day and night. For that shack was in a tropical area, under a blazing, burning sun, and also under a fantastically starlit sky. And a moon that seemed much larger than one ever sees in Europe.

People lived in that shack, though "living" is a slight exaggeration. They were put away there. Outside was the barbed wire on which the sun and moon flashed little sparks wherever it had not grown rusty in the course of the years. Yes, it had been years -- or had it been centuries? You did not know offhand -- you were too tired, too ill, and too weak even to think about following the hours and the days. You had in the beginning, but that had stopped long ago. You were confronted more with eternity than with days or hours. For so many died, beside you and all around you, from hunger, dysentery, and other tropical diseases -- or just because they did not want to live any longer. Their last spark of hope had been extinguished.

We tried to hang on a little even so in that concentration camp. Why -- [we] really did not know. [We] long ago had given up believing in the end of the war, in liberation. [We] lived on out of a kind of routine, in a stupor, numb, and with only one passion left ... eating, eating, whatever it was. But there was nothing there, we were systematically starved. There was

one man in that camp who still possessed something edible. It was a candle, a plain wax candle. Of course, he had not originally taken it along or saved it in order to eat it. A normal human being does not eat tallow, [but], it is fat....

Whenever he could not stand the torture of hunger any longer, he would take out the candle -- which he kept well hidden in a beaten-up little suitcase -- and nibble on it. But he did not eat it. He considered it his final hope of salvation. Sometime, when everyone else would be mad with hunger (and that would not be too far away now), he would eat that candle. I hope you don't think this strange or gruesome. I who was his companion thought it very normal at the time. In fact, he had promised me a small piece of the candle. It became my task in life, my constant care, to see that he did not, in the end, eat that candle all by himself. I watched intently and even spied on him and his little suitcase day and night. Having to fulfill such an important task perhaps kept me alive.

Well, one day we learned it was Christmas. Somebody had accidentally discovered this after long calculations.... He told us all. And then added in a rather flat and expressionless tone, "Next Christmas we will be home." We nodded or did not react at all. We had heard that for several years now. Still there were a few who clung to the thought -- for you never know....

Then someone said ... -- "At Christmas, candles burn and bells ring."

I must confess that the remark passed most of us unnoticed. It was of no concern to us, it spoke of something so completely outside of our existence -- and yet, it had the most amazing and unexpected effects.

When it was late in the evening, and everybody was just lying there on the boards, with his own thoughts, or without any thoughts at all, my friend became restless. He edged over to his little suitcase and got out the candle. I could see it very well in the dark, that white candle. He is eating it, I thought -- if only he remembers me now... He put the candle on his board, and then disappeared outside where a small fire was smoldering. He returned with a burning sliver of wood. Like a ghost, that little flame wandered through the shack until it reached its place, close to me. Then the strange thing happened: my friend took that piece of wood, that fire, and lighted his candle.

The candle stood on his board and burned.

I do not know how everyone discovered it so immediately, but it was not long before one shadow after another edged closer, half-naked men on whom you could count the ribs, with hollow cheeks and feverish "hunger-eyes." Silently they formed a circle around the burning candle.

One by one they came closer, those naked men, also the minister and the priest...

The priest said in a hoarse voice: "It is Christmas. The light shineth in darkness."

And then the minister added: "And the darkness comprehended it not."

This, if I am correct, is from the *Gospel according to John*. You can find it in the Bible, but that night, around this candle, it was not a written Word of centuries ago. It was a living reality, a message for this hour and for us, for each one of us.

For the Light *was* shining in the darkness. And the darkness did not comprehend [or overtake] it. At the time you didn't reason it out, but that was what we felt, silent around that Christmas light, that white candle, that pointed flame.

There was something extraordinary about it. That candle was whiter and slimmer than I ever have seen since. And that flame -- it was a flame that reached to the sky, in which we saw Things that are not of this world. I will never be able to talk about it -- none of us will, who is still alive. That was a secret, a secret between the Christ child and ourselves. For at that time, we were certain that It existed, that It lived among us and for us. We sang silently, we prayed without a word, and I have heard that bells started pealing and a choir of angels sang. Yes, I am certain about this, and I have at least a hundred witnesses, though most of them cannot speak any longer. They are not here now; but that does not mean they would not know anymore.

Yonder, deep in the swamps and jungle, thin, angelic voices sang Christmas songs for us, and the bronze of a thousand bells resounded.

Where this all came from also remains a secret. That candle burned higher and higher, its flame growing more and more pointed until it reached the ridgepole of that high, dark shack and then went right through it up to the stars, and everything became white with light. So much light no one has ever seen since. And we felt ourselves free and lifted up and did not know hunger anymore. That candle had fed not only my friend and me, that candle had nourished and strengthened us all.

There was no end to the light. And when someone said softly: "Next Christmas home," we believed it this time unconditionally. For the light itself had brought us that message; it was written in fiery letters in that Christmas flame; whether you want to believe me or not, I saw it myself.

The candle kept burning all through the night. There is no candle in the whole world that can burn so long and so high... That candle saved the lives of many of us. We then knew it was worthwhile to go on, that somewhere, at the end, for each one of us a Home was waiting.

And that was indeed the case.

Some returned home to Holland before the next Christmas... Most of the others went home also, before the next Christmas -- I myself helped lay them down in the earth behind our camp, in a dry spot between the swamps. But when they died their eyes were less dull than before. That was the light of that strange candle. The Light that the darkness had not comprehended...ⁱ

My friends, the God who took on our flesh does not ignore darkness but shines in the very midst of it. May we know afresh the joy and hope of God in Christ and therefore choose to not live in darkness, but trust in and testify to the light.

ⁱ Willem Brandt, “And the Darkness Comprehended It Not,” *Sunrise Magazine*, Theosophical University Press, December 2004/ January 2005.