

CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATION

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In the weeks leading up to Christmas, as we have been celebrating the season of Advent, we have been reflecting on the gifts that are offered in the coming of Christ – hope, peace, joy, and love. And this may seem like a tall order – after all, there are still times when we are overcome with feelings of hopelessness. Moments when peace in our hearts is lost and peace in our world, and a world filled with love seems like a distant, unattainable desire. When we are overcome with tragedy and pain in our lives and world we may feel little joy. How could we ever think that a little baby is going to bring all of that into our world?

Back in 2013, when I had completed my first year of seminary, my first year of training in ministry, I was asked to pastor a small church – at the time I didn't know if I was ready and still, I heard myself saying "yes" and so I was licensed into ministry to serve that particular congregation in Pennsylvania. This would indeed be a baptism by fire sort of experience, sink or swim if you will. But I had some great mentors and so I wasn't too worried but I knew that I would experience all of my "firsts" in ministry – first wedding, first funeral, first baptism, first Easter, and first Christmas, and many more. And I was certainly nervous but I felt that God had called me to say "yes" so I was ready to go. Now, it didn't take long for my very first first to come along. A baptism had already been scheduled for my second Sunday – it was a baptism for one of the newborns in our congregation, only a few months old. Now, I had all the words I needed to say, knowing that this sacrament was one of God's grace and one of entering the church. I knew where everything was that we needed for the celebration. There was only one minor detail that made me a little nervous. I had never held a baby before! Yes I may have been 22 at the time, but it never came up! I had no little cousins – there were no babies in my immediate family and so there was never an opportunity to hold an infant. What if she didn't like me and she just cried and cried and cried? What if, God forbid, she squirmed out of my hands and I dropped her?

Now a few days before the baptism, I had a meeting with the parents to talk about the promises that they would be making and to meet the child. And during this time, I asked if I could hold the little one - I thought a little practice would be helpful. So for the first 30 seconds or so, everything went fine, and then she started to fuss. That's when her mother told me that she doesn't like to be on her back. She prefers to be held upright so I readjusted and for another minute things were fine, and then I handed her back to mom.

Well soon enough, Sunday rolled around and it was time for the baptism and it all seemed to be going so well. She was baptized, she wasn't fussing, I had her in the secured, upright position she preferred and I was offering a prayer after the baptism. Then, she started to cry. And I was trying to say the prayers, speaking louder and louder to be heard over the cry which too grew louder and louder, when I heard from the congregation, a mentor of mine whispering, bounce her. I realized then that I was standing so stiff and ridged, and so I began to bounce, not just the baby but my entire body. And to my surprise, the cries quieted, she nestled into my shoulder, and she fell asleep. I don't even remember if I finished the prayer, I assume I did, but in that moment, I felt a joy like none other as that moment touched my heart deeply. I felt this child expressing an unconditional love to me, a complete stranger in so many ways to her but she loved. I felt hope for the future, for the world, because if this little angel is going to grow up in this world, you better believe we are going to do our best to make it great for her! And I felt peace, a peace that washed away any nerves, any fear, any worry, a peace that grounded me in that moment and that moment alone and all was silent - all was bright.

Every Christmas I reflect back on that experience - for that little child revealed something to me about the gifts of Christmas as only a child can. Sure, there are many ways that we could look at the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus to see how these gifts that we celebrate in Advent come to fruition in our world and in our lives. And we have all year to see that impact, to be moved and transformed by it. But on this

Christmas Eve, might I suggest that we don't jump ahead into all that the life of Jesus holds, but we look solely at the gift that slept in the manger. For there are ways in which only a child can lead us to a world filled with hope, peace, joy, and love. Merry Christmas and Amen.