

Longest Night 2021, St. David's Episcopal Church, Matthew 2:13-23 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

I've been passionate about this service not only here but in the previous church I served. The holidays can be excruciating for people who grieve, and the darkness around us can feel oppressive. But as the bulletin we are using tonight says, since tonight is the solstice, while winter is just beginning, it also means that every day we will get a little more light than the one before. We may not notice it for a while, but it starts tonight.

While I have long been passionate about this service I failed to understand its real power until about six years ago, the first time I led it after my father died. I broke down in the middle of the service, so the next year, Jeunee led it with me.

I'm grateful to have Jeunee back in a year when we probably all need this service, after two difficult years not only for those of us who grieve due to personal losses, but for the whole world as we struggle to find our way to the end of the pandemic. Last year we were shut down at this time so did not observe the Longest Night here at St. David's, and I remember thinking what a shame that was because we needed it so much. We need it again this year.

I needed this service last year. Two years ago at this time, I had a biopsy scheduled, and learned on New Year's Eve that I had breast cancer. After surgery and during radiation, I learned that I had another and later stage diagnosis, of lung cancer. As the world continued to shut down, I had half of my left lung removed, and instead of sitting in the waiting room at the heart hospital in Chippenham with patients and families as I had many times as a priest, I sat there utterly alone, in the dark, because no one was allowed to be with me. Not even my husband.

I remember that dark morning tonight, as we sit together in the darkness. The dark can be scary, but also quiet. Sometimes we might feel closer to God in the dark, and other times God might seem farther away when it's dark.

Two years ago I used tonight's Gospel for the Longest Night for the first time. I forgot until I revisited that bulletin for this year. I had struggled in previous years to make the Christmas story relevant for the Longest Night, for people coming with broken hearts to sit with other people with broken hearts.

The Christmas story is a humble one, but at first is a happy one, with the birth of the savior of the world. It takes a dark turn after the birth with tonight's episode. This terrible story from Matthew is sometimes read on the 28th of December, but we rarely read it here at St. David's, because it is so disturbing, and not what most of us want to hear at Christmas.

But like death, and sickness, this story is part of the Christmas story. Part of the story of baby Jesus. Part of our story.

In previous eras, this story was better known. In fact, in the fifteenth century, it was made into the "Coventry carol," a song. And that song is in our hymnal that is in front of you, hymn 247. We almost included it in our Lessons and Carols service for Sunday, but I took it out, because we are going to have kids dressed up that day as part of the Christmas story, and I couldn't bear to have this story read as part of something like a pageant.

Back when it was written, the carol was performed as part of a play. Such plays were popular in medieval times and were a significant way people in England learned Bible stories, since Bibles weren't in English until late in the reign of Henry VIII.

I wonder why fifteenth-century people were more comfortable with a story about a king killing children. I wonder if it was because they were intimately familiar with tyrants. Maybe it was because plague was more visible then: it came and went. Sickness, death.

I used to believe that our contemporary American culture had a toxic positivity problem, but such positivity has been harder to maintain in 2020 and 2021. Now we have had to become more accustomed to a pandemic. We are exhausted. The pandemic has taken people we loved, and other terrible things have happened during the pandemic, some of which may feel overshadowed.

I'm grateful that we have space this evening to feel whatever we're feeling, and to bring it before God. You are invited to use either your own writing instrument or one of the little pencils we have to write whatever is on your heart tonight on the piece of rice paper tucked in your bulletin, and when you come forward for communion, you are invited to place that paper in the blue bowl of water, in which it will dissolve.

This isn't a magical act that will make you feel better, but a way to symbolically offer our sorrows to God. Emmanuel, God-with-us, who came down at Christmas to be with us, not as part of an over-the-top festive and glittery celebration but so that Christ could experience the whole range of the human experience, including sorrow. Sorrow is part of our story.