

A Light in Dark Places
Christmas Eve 2025

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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Christmas begins in the dark. And not just the darkness of the silent night in the stable, into which Jesus is born. But the darkness of violence and suffering at the hands of the Roman empire; the darkness of fear and despair that gripped the hearts of the Jewish people in their occupied land. That is also the darkness into which Jesus is born. That darkness is the reason why we need God incarnate to be with us. You might say that darkness is the reason for the season. In times of personal, national, or global turmoil, the glittery hype and rabid consumerism of commercial Christmas can seem like a pretty band-aid we place on our troubled world. And in our heart of hearts, we know that that band-aid will disintegrate long before our wounds are healed. So, we come together tonight to remember that Christmas is not meant to cover those wounds or numb our pain for a period of time only to leave us gasping with exhaustion and emptiness on December 26th. Christmas acknowledges our darkness because that's where it comes from. And it delivers a light in Jesus Christ meant to warm our spirits and guide our steps, not just during the season of holiday shopping deals and nonstop Christmas songs, but in every moment of our lives.

We read in our sacred text that the first thing God created out of Their great love was light. And the Word was with God right there in the beginning and then, when a strongman government covered the ancient Western world with violent subjugation, and the people cried out for deliverance just like they had in Egypt under Pharaoh, and God heard them just like God had before, the Word became flesh to celebrate at weddings and suffer under empire right alongside the people. And the Word was the light in the darkness, and no darkness, no empire nor any earthly principality, could overpower it.

Fantasy nerd that I am, I can't help but think of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring. The particular passage that comes to mind is when the ethereal Lady Galadriel gifts a crystal phial of starlight to Frodo, the unlikely and reluctant hero on a seemingly hopeless quest to destroy a great evil. Galadriel says of the phial, "It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." Now, I'm told that Christmas Eve is not the time for me to go off on the theology of The Lord of the Rings and its implications for creation care based on its allusions to post-industrial Britain. Fine. But I will point out that Tolkien himself witnessed the worst of humanity when he fought in World War I. His children recount how he would occasionally talk "of the horrors of the first German gas attack, of the utter exhaustion and ominous quiet after a bombardment, of the whining scream of the shells, and the endless marching, always on foot, through a devastated landscape." Perhaps servicemen or veterans who are with us tonight can relate. After all that trauma, Tolkien came home and wrote The Lord of the Rings, an epic tale of the power of regular people working together to do the right thing in

the face of evil; regular people like the farmers and fishermen and shepherds that were closest to Jesus. Maybe it had something to do with his Catholic faith, but either way, despite all he had seen, Tolkien did not give up hope for humanity, he did not let that light go out.

Sometimes the 2,000-year-old Christmas story feels intangible, though it is just as real as the gifts we hold in our hands on Christmas morning. Sometimes the joy of the holiday feels at odds with the state of the world, though Christmas itself sprouted from a place of suffering and despair. A wee little light sparked and sputtered in a wee little baby, and it spread from there into the most unlikely corners of this blessed creation, through generations, inspiring all kinds of people. Today, maybe you see the light shining brightest right in the gospels, even in a time when some would twist those gospels into their own messages of hate and exclusion. Maybe you see it shining just as bright in the works of Tolkien or other prophetic authors, even in a time of censorship and misinformation. Maybe you see it dappled on a forest floor or glinting off the surface of a lake, even in the face of global climate change and deforestation. Anytime we put our hope in that light and let it guide us through dark places, we are living into the true meaning of Christmas. Anytime we reflect that light of hope out into a world of suffering and oppression, we are living into the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas begins in the dark, but it doesn't end there.