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Merry Christmas to All My Siblings in Christ!

This Sunday coming marks the longest night of the year and just a few days following comes the most glorious night of the year as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. While I am sure some of you could delve into the historicity of that most holy of nights and its relationship to the longest of nights, I prefer to keep my reflections of this “coincidence” simple and pastoral.

As we prepare ourselves for both the hunkering down for a long winter’s night and the promise of light it inherently brings as the days begin to lengthen, many of our communities will host “Longest Night” or “Blue Christmas” liturgies. I encourage you in these traditions. As the Church it is our responsibility to meet God’s children – all of them regardless of religion, creed, or colour – where they are. The truth is that in the world we are living with economic, political, climate, and so many other insecurities, more and more people are finding that a “Blue Christmas” is something which speaks to their heart.

As Christians, and as the Church, we are called to seek them out, sit with them as they wonder, ponder, even worry, and then, when they feel they have been heard, we have opportunity to speak to them about the hope, love, peace, and joy which come in Christ almost immediately on the heels of that longest night. Our community churches and gatherings in this Advent and Christmastide *must make room for those who feel they have no room into which to be welcomed*. Open wide your doors, gently share candles of quiet and simple light, and make space for those who are struggling. There will be time after the longest night to welcome them into that most holy and glorious of nights!

As we prepare then to gather in our church Christmas Eve liturgies with chaotic pageants, much anticipated choir anthems, and finally actual Christmas Carols, we will all transition from that sense of the longest of nights into the beauty of the most loving of nights. Christmas Eve, which is often when the “Christmas worship” happens, offers us all opportunity to play in the tensions of the chaos that becomes Christmas. From the hectic efforts of getting children dressed and out the door for church, last minute meal preparations, or maybe even packing up and travelling afar, to the gentle beauty of the haunting sounds of *Silent Night, Holy Night*, to the quiet crunch of feet on new snow which has fallen while we were inside the beautiful church, to those moments after children have gone to bed, preparations for Santa have been completed and that last few moments with an eggnog, a mulled wine, or a hot toddy beckon us to quiet and rest, we experience all the tensions of what Christmas holds.

Joy, laughter, company, and loudness are often balanced by moments of peace, silence, and pondering. We move from the longest of nights to that most holy of nights with all those who have walked the Christmas journey before us ... and all who walk that same journey after us.

The common threads which tie these times – the longest of nights and the holiest of nights – are the very ones we remember and the One whom we worship. I encourage you to remember that Mary and Joseph also endured that longest of nights. It was a night which held much that was still unknown and probably many of the same worries and fears we bear over two thousand years later. But then God ushered in what was to become the antidote to that longest of nights – salvation, peace, hope, and love. That first Christmas would also have had its chaos as a baby was born and laid in a manger. That first Christmas also brought with it moments of quiet as the baby rested and Mary pondered. The chaotic gifts of new life and wonder made way for the gentle gifts of listening, praying, pondering.

As you and your family make the journey with the Holy Family through the Longest night and into that Holiest of nights, allow yourselves to feel the emotions, express your worries, breathe deeply as you wonder ... and then continue that journey into chaotic relief, joy, and exuberance, balanced with moments of listening, praying, and pondering. May you live into all that God is offering you this season, and may you experience the fullness of humanity which we celebrate as Jesus began to experience it as well.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

God bless you all!

Yours in Christ and in Hope,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 't' and the name 'Rachael'.

Bishop Rachael Parker