

I will never forget the first Christmas I spent in a pastoral position. I was serving a huge congregation in a Twin Cities suburb, and we had no less than 14 Christmas services in a 24-hour timeframe. Each of those services was quite well-attended, with hundreds of people worshipping together. Between the 8 of us on the pastoral staff, we joyfully proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ, and shared various worship-leading responsibilities throughout the day.

When we got to the 7pm traditional service, we had about 1200 people in attendance, and it was my turn to lead candlelight Silent Night. This is the part of Christmas Eve where the lights dim down, candles are brought out, and lit across the sanctuary as we begin to sing that holy and classic hymn. So when the moment came, I took my little handheld candle to the Christ candle in the Advent wreath, and started the passing of the light.

In this enormous sanctuary, the candlelight began with my one little flame in my hand, passed to the ushers, and systemically passed down the aisles and then individual rows of pews.

I could hardly hold in my tears as I got to witness the one little candle lit in my hand soon turning into this stunning tapestry of flickering flames and joyful light, flames lit between mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, grandparents and cousins and beloved friends and all the people who felt just a little less lonely that night being part of something gorgeous and powerful. All because I lit one candle that was still held in my hands.

Dear friends, it has been one absolute heck of a year. So many things have changed and been upended and caused pain and suffering and hurting and death and it all just seems like too much when we really stop and think about it. The struggles of this year have been super real, and many of us will remember 2020 as the challenge it has absolutely been - or as the internet likes to call it, a “dumpster fire” of a year.

But friends, by the grace of God, the challenges and struggles of this year are not everything, they are not the whole of life or reality around us. Even in the most unlikely of circumstances, even when it seems like hope is lost and things seem impossible, there are still little moments and pockets of joy

to be found. And these little moments of joy are just as much a part of your reality as the struggles and hardships. Small and humble moments of joy woven together are what continue to fill us with hope and new life, and they spread into even greater tapestries of witnessing love around us. The glory of over a thousand candles lighting up a sanctuary still started with my one small flame. Your one small flame is part of the great tapestry of light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it. Your one small light is powerful, and changes the world within and around you for the better. Jesus gives all of us that light, showing up in these little pockets of joy. Jesus' light gives us both hope and joy, even when it's challenging and fearful.

Faithful people are no strangers to incredibly challenging and fearful situations, and even the people in the Christmas story boldly find moments of hope and joy in the midst of their challenges. Mary agreed to be the mother of God's Son, against all the cultural norms of the time, and at such an incredibly young age as well, yet cannot help but praise God, who is faithful to all generations. Joseph was afraid and planned to quietly dismiss Mary and move on from this whole situation, but God called him to be the earthly father of this little boy Jesus, and through his strong faith and commitment, Joseph led and supported Mary throughout this time and beyond, a father for many. And the shepherds, seeing this blindingly bright star shine around them terrified them! They had no clue what this meant and how to handle it, and care for their flocks in the midst of it. But God, through the angel, said "do not be afraid!" and shared the good news of Jesus the Messiah's birth with them. These shepherds who were afraid were some of the first to celebrate the newborn king, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us.

That the birth of one little baby in a little town in the middle of nowhere ancient Israel could have such an enormous impact on us all, is nothing less than the miraculous power of God's love. One baby born thousands of years ago, thousands of miles away still yet has power beyond our imagining, power to cast out the most painful experiences, power to love in the midst of what is unfathomable and unlovable. The birth of this one little

baby, Jesus Christ, indeed brought the love and joy that changed the world forever, brought the kingdom of God even closer to us here on Earth, and we have the gift of celebrating that little new life on this Christmas Eve. One small baby, born in the humblest of circumstances, made God's love for humanity real and tangible and human itself. Our pockets of joy, in our human experience, show God's love too, and for these moments of joy, we give God unending thanks.

As we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our Messiah, Savior and Lord, dear friends, I pray that you will continue to find pockets of joy in the midst of what challenges you. I pray that even in this horrible year, there are still moments of love and new life that bring you joy and remind you of the goodness of this world God created and continues to choose, over and over again. And I pray that in praising God for the gift of Jesus Christ, you are renewed, you are brought peace, you find life-saving moments of joy, and you find your life in the hope that He brings. Thanks be to God, and Merry Christmas everyone, Amen.