

Christmas Eve 2008
Pastor Craig M. Mueller

HALF-SPENT WAS THE NIGHT

What are we doing up in the middle of the night? It's past my bedtime! But just days after the winter solstice, with today's sunset at 4:25, already six hours ago, and sunrise at 7:17 tomorrow, it is the middle of the night. But imagine living in Anchorage where sunrise is at 10:15 and sunset at 3:43! Now that *would* cause Seasonal Affective Disorder.

But what are we doing at church in the middle of a long, cold wintry night? Many of us grew up going to either Midnight Mass or late-night services around 11:00 p.m. A Swedish tradition is a Julotta service at 5:00 am Christmas morning—don't you think it would be even worse getting up in the middle of the night! When I was in high school we would go to the 11:00 service and then I would play trumpet at the 6 am Julotta service at my Swedish Lutheran congregation. Was I a little too into church?

But these days there seems to be a trend toward earlier Christmas Eve services. Is it because the baby-boomers are aging and don't want to stay up as late? My quick survey of Lutheran churches in the area revealed only a few still at 11pm. Others have gradually crept back to 10, 9, 8, 7:30 and even 6!

Maybe that's why some Catholics ask each other: *What time is your Midnight Mass?* It's not always at midnight, it seems.

One of our loveliest carols tells of Jesus' birth *when half spent was the night.*

No one knows what year Jesus was born, let alone what day and time. Some scholars speculate that shepherds would only be in the fields between March and November. The story from Luke speaks of angels lighting up the night sky with their song. But the tradition of the late-night, midnight liturgy may come from a lovely verse from the apocryphal Book of Wisdom: *When all things were in quiet silence, and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word leaped down from heaven's royal throne.*

And then there's the parable of the five wise and five foolish bridesmaids, and the bridegroom coming at midnight! Midnight is the least likely time we would expect a visitor, much less the Savior himself.

Midnight, the middle-of-the night is also a liminal time between yesterday and tomorrow, a time out of time. Ancient cultures believed that the doors between the worlds open at midnight when spirits can cross into our world.

Long nights can be challenging for us if we can't sleep. Or we're afraid of the dark. Or we are lonely or afraid. Or if you're homeless on a bitter, cold night.

Christ comes among us, is born into the midst of our long, dark night. He comes into our imperfect lives and into our world marked by war and violence, greed and poverty. His coming does not take away the darkness. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, writes Isaiah. And the light shines in the darkness, we heard in John.

Maybe that's why we've come to church in the middle of the night. Maybe we can't put it into words, but we know that there is more than all the externals of Christmas. Maybe we want to be connected to the light of hope that shines through the ages. Maybe we want to taste again the promise of God's grace, the Word made flesh among us in bread and wine. Maybe we don't know why we're here.

George Herbert wrote that "life is half spent before we know what it is."

Yet we have known midnight in one way or another. And we know that many around our globe and even in our city are waiting for the light to shine on them. So even in the darkness we sing. And cling to the promise of dawn.