

## Pastor's Message - Christmas Eve (2022)

In all their years together, Emily had always been the one who directed the decorating of their house for Christmas -- with one exception, but we'll come to that in a moment. When Emily had moved into Tom's house after their wedding, among the things she brought with her were two large boxes filled with garland, tree ornaments, and assorted other Christmas bric-a-brac that she had retrieved from her grandmother's house after the old woman died. Beyond a tree in the living room, Tom's family had never done much decorating for Christmas, so he hadn't considered that it might be different with Emily. But in early December of their first year, Emily asked him to bring the two boxes down from attic where Tom had put them when they had gone to housekeeping together.

Large as the boxes were, there really weren't that many individual pieces when they unpacked them. Besides the artificial greens and some bulbs and strings of lights for the tree, there were a few figurines -- a Santa, two angels, a cluster of carolers in 19th-century garb, a snowman, and a complete nativity scene. That day, Emily placed those objects in strategic locations around the house. But as she examined the remaining things, she commented that some would not do. For one thing, the light strings were the old kind, where when one light bulb burned out the whole string went dark.

"We can afford some new lights, can't we?" she asked Tom.

"I imagine so," Tom said. "I don't think they cost much."

Rummaging deeper into the boxes, she pulled out a carton containing delicate glass tree ornaments. A couple had gotten broken, but the rest looked all right.

"We'll need to get a tree, of course," she said. Tom agreed that they could go to the tree lot that very afternoon.

Looking satisfied with what they had done, Emily suggested that Tom put the storage boxes back in the attic. Tom carried the first one up, but when he picked up the second, he noticed a dingy white object protruding from beneath the rumpled newspaper packing material still in the box. Pulling the papers aside, Tom found four plastic candlesticks with electric cords extending from them -- the kind that use nightlight-size light bulbs. "What about these?" Tom asked, holding one up.

Emily frowned. "I don't remember Grandma ever using those. I didn't know she had them. Just leave them in the box, I guess."

"We could put them in the front windows," Tom said.

"If you want to. It's up to you."

Later, when they made the trip for the tree, they stopped in the village hardware store for new light strings, and while they were there Tom purchased light bulbs for the window candles.

Putting the candlesticks in place was easy enough. There was plenty of room on the windowsills of the old house Tom and Emily were buying. For two of

the windows there were wall outlets near enough that the electric plugs reached them, but for the other two Tom had to make another run to the hardware store and purchase extension cords to get electricity to them. But he soon had all four candles burning -- two in the two main-floor front windows and two in the two second-floor front windows.

Darkness fell by 5 p.m. in December, and Tom liked the warm glow the window candles shed in the rooms where they were burning. He put on his coat and walked outside to see how they looked to passersby, and it seemed to him that the candlelight somehow made the house look warmer and more inviting, especially when compared to the dark houses on either side where no one was home at that moment.

It turned out, however, that keeping the candles burning wasn't as easy as Tom had thought it would be. They were not well designed. All plastic, there wasn't enough weight in the base of each one to keep the candlestick part upright if anything disturbed it. One got knocked over when Emily's cat jumped onto the window ledge. The upset jolted the bulb so that it burned super bright for about a minute and then went permanently dark. Another was yanked over when Tom, moving a chair, caught the leg on one of the candle's electric cords. A third fell down repeatedly simply because it was top-heavy, and by the time a week had passed, Tom had had to replace some of the light bulbs twice. Seeing his frustration, Emily suggested that they just forget the window candles, but Tom had other ideas.

That was because, when he could keep them burning, the effect, with the small lights shining in the darkness, was cheering. And though Tom was not very demonstrative, something about those small lights in the night touched a quiet place inside himself.

So Tom decided to tackle the problem. When he couldn't think of an easy way to add weight to the hollow plastic bases themselves, he instead attached them with screws to pieces of wood he had cut to match the width of the window sill. The attached wood gave the candlesticks a wider footprint and increased their stability somewhat, but still the candles sometimes went over thanks to the cat or to tangling with one of the power cords. Not to be defeated, however, Tom used some C-clamps to fasten the new wooden bases securely to the ledges.

That solved the problem. But of course, all this engineering did not add to the decor of the house, but Emily had a quick solution for that. Now that the candlesticks were firmly anchored, she hung some greenery from them that covered the wood and the clamps.

And so it went for several years. Early in December, Tom helped Emily with the general decorating. Each year, Emily purchased a few new ornaments and other seasonal items, and soon Tom was hauling four, then five, then six boxes down from the attic as the decorating began; but installing the window candles

always was his project alone.

That first year, Tom removed the candles during the first week of January when the tree came down and the rest of the decorations were returned to storage, but as the early darkness continued through the cold evenings of January and February, Tom found himself wishing he'd left the candles in place. He missed the tiny lights shining bravely in the night. Emily liked them too, but she wasn't drawn to them the way Tom was. So starting with the next Christmas, Tom, with Emily's agreement, left the candles in the windows after the other accoutrements of Christmas had been returned to the attic. They remained in place until late February, when the natural light began to linger longer.

Tom and Emily's daughter Susie was born while they lived in that house, and when Emily became pregnant with their second child, they decided they needed a bigger place. Tom had been promoted to a better-paying position at work, and they calculated that they could afford to make the move.

The new place was nice, but there were more windows, so when their first December there rolled around, Tom shopped for additional candlesticks. He was disappointed to find that the ones available weren't any better made than the old ones they had, but he now had another problem. The windows in the new house had almost no sills at all, certainly nothing wide enough to accommodate the plastic candles, with or without the wooden bases Tom had added. Emily suggested that they discontinue having window candles, but Tom wouldn't hear of it, and he soon engineered a solution. Using scraps of wood, he constructed little shelves that he attached to the narrow sills with screws. The resulting affair was, if not pretty, at least sturdy. As before, Emily covered the improvised platforms with holiday greens.

One of the families in this new neighborhood was really big into outdoor Christmas lights. They put strings of light along the eaves of the roof, around the trim of their windows and doors, and in every tree in the front yard. They had a huge Santa all in lights, and on the roof they put a painted plywood sleigh with lights all over it. When Tom and Emily drove by the house, Emily said, "Wow! Look at that!"

"It's overdone," Tom said. "Too gaudy."

The winters went by, and in each one, from December to February, Tom's candles shone in the darkness.

There was, however, one year that they almost didn't. That November, their daughter Susie died in a traffic accident while riding with some of her high-school friends. Grief hung heavy in the air of their house as December began, and neither Emily nor Tom had much heart for decorating, but they finally forced themselves to do so for the sake of Rachel, their younger daughter. They put the tree up and some of the figurines, but for Tom, the sorrow inside was so deep that displaying light from his windows seemed like a lie. But then Rachel asked, "Dad, aren't you going to put the candles in the windows?" She sounded so

forlorn that Tom knew he had to install them, regardless of how he felt. And so he went to work, screwing his improvised platforms into place and anchoring the candlesticks to them.

Then on Christmas Eve, as they sat in the service at the church they had attended for years, their pastor read from the first chapter of John where the gospel writer spoke of Jesus as the Word that brought life and light to our world. "The light shines in the darkness," the pastor read, "and the darkness did not overcome it." When Tom heard that verse, he thought of his window candles, and he was glad Rachel had pushed him to put them up.

A few years later, Tom was in a store in late autumn when he noticed window candles for sale. Unlike the ones he'd used for years, however, these were well-designed affairs that wouldn't fall over. Each gleaming white candlestick had a single metal foot that could be inserted under the window sash. These improved candlesticks cost more than twice as much as the old kind, but Tom was so happy to see the improvement that he immediately purchased enough to replace all of his old ones, plus enough for Rachel's house too. She had just married, and had recently asked her dad how to fix her window candles so they wouldn't fall over. So from then on, Christmas candles burned from Advent to Lent in both households.

There's not a lot more to this story. Tom and Emily had a lot of years together. Rachel brought her children home to visit their grandparents often. The family had its measure of good times and joy and troubles and pain like most of us do. They were ordinary folks like we are.

But the day finally came when Tom's heart gave out. He lay for several days in the hospital, conscious but growing rapidly weaker. Emily was with him almost constantly, while Rachel came for hours every day and her husband brought the children for brief visits. As long as he could, Tom talked and laughed with them all, but eventually he could no longer respond. His eyes were shut and his breathing was labored. It went on that way for hours, until all at once a smile spread across Tom's face. "What is it, Tom?" Emily asked, hoping he could hear her.

"I won't need window candles," he said. And then he was gone.

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This week we celebrate the one who brought the light that no darkness can overcome. Probably most of us do not get as captured by a single symbol of Christmas as did Tom, but in this world that has its share of gloom and heartache, we need this seasonal reminder that Jesus is the light of the world and that that light cannot be extinguished by any darkness, no matter how powerful. Not ever.

And in the end, the light wins.