

Midnight Mass
December 24, 2008
Church of the Holy Communion

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*In the bleak mid-winter, frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone... **

... at least that is the poetic setting for Christmas Eve. In the semi-tropical climate of Charleston, the wind may occasionally make moan, rattling the roof of our beloved parish church, but the earth is seldom hard as iron, pluff mud having a higher freezing temperature, and we can dream of a white Christmas as much as we'd like, but it isn't likely.

But regardless of the local weather, there is something about *cold* and *dark* that gets our attention.

Long before he had ever heard of Al Gore or *Global Warming*, my father used to quip, in the way our elders always do when they wish to impress upon us that our lives have been much easier than theirs... *It doesn't get cold in the South like it used to when I was a boy. Why, I've even seen icicles push up out of the ground!*

A recent sports editorial in a New York newspaper, offering its opinion on the poor performance of a particular quarterback whose exploits in cold weather were *once* legendary suggested rather callously, *There is a reason **old** people move to Florida...!*

And so, while Christmas hymns and poetry invoke ice and snow and wind and frost, the truth is that cold changes us. It slows us down. It forces us indoors. Too much of it can kill us.

In fact, there is a very evocative line from James Thurber's little work *The Thirteen Clocks* that completely captivated me a week or so ago when I heard it being read on the radio. Thurber writes of *...the night time froze to death.*

Thurber, who often in his younger years illustrated his own works was blind by 1950 when he wrote *The Thirteen Clocks*. And so from his darkened world he invited us to consider a night when it was so cold that time itself froze and died...

It is memorable little line, isn't it? And more true than we at first might realize.

The phone rings at three o'clock in the morning... and time freezes to death...

The soldiers knock at the door with grim faces...and time freezes to death.

We lay open our vulnerable hearts to those we trusted to love us...and time freezes to death.

On the battlefields of war or in the hardness of urban violence... the bullets fly... and time freezes to death.

It was a cold, dark and hard world, on that bleak mid-winter night so long ago. A cold night for shepherds keeping watch over their flocks...

But a fire was kindled in heaven, sparked by the eternal Word of God, and the cold, hard earth was touched by the fire and light of God...

*Whenas all the world was in profoundest quietness, and night was in the midst of her swift course: thine almighty Word O Lord, leaped down from heaven, out of thy Royal Throne. ***

“The Word was made Flesh, and dwelt among us.” And in that cold night a mother cradled a small child in her arms, as his warm breath made little traces in the brisk night air...

What a marvelous thing, to see...there before your very eyes... the warm breath of God, come down to soothe the poor sinners.... on the night time froze to death.

His mother held him to her heart. For this small, tightly wrapped bundle of humanity was destined for the rise and fall of many. In his presence, hearts would be convicted.... in his presence, hearts would be changed... in his presence, hearts would be strangely warmed.

And so here we are, coming as we do every year to Midnight Mass...

We come both to his manger and to his altar throne this night... bringing our hurts, our fears, our worries, our cold and frozen hearts... trusting that once more, he will meet us and heal us. That he will restore our joy, our hope, our sense of purpose in this world...

My dear friends, on this Holy night, may the peace of God indeed keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and may he bless you, and those you love, this Christmastide, and forevermore.

Amen

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*Christina Rossetti

**introit for Christmas II