

December 24 and 25, Nativity (Luke 2:1-20)

When does tonight become tomorrow? Is it the first glint of daybreak? The first breath of the baby?

by [Lee Hull Moses](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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When I was growing up, my father was always the pastor of every church I attended and the preacher every Christmas Eve. Some people can't read Luke 2 without hearing the voice of Linus from the 1965 Charlie Brown Christmas special. I can't read it without hearing my dad. It's been a long time—he's been retired for a while now—but still, when I read "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus," it's my dad's voice I hear.

Another phrase my dad used every Christmas Eve is so ingrained in my memory it might as well be gospel. When it came time for the prayers, he prayed for the people of the congregation, for the church and the community, for whatever crisis was happening in the world that year. And then, without fail, he prayed for emergency personnel on duty "tonight and tomorrow." Some years he prayed for doctors and nurses, sometimes for firefighters or EMTs, but it was always "tonight and tomorrow."

It was an acknowledgment that while most of us would go home after the service and tuck in with our families, not emerging until the 26th, when we were stir-crazy and out of milk, there were many people who would not. There were those who would keep watch through the night and into the next day, working instead of resting, ready to respond to the needs of the world.

The phrase found its way into my own prayers when I began leading worship on Christmas Eve, and for years I also prayed for those on duty tonight and tomorrow. Even now, though I'm in a season of ministry when I'm not praying publicly on Christmas Eve, I silently add the phrase to whatever prayers are offered.

It's more than a prayer for me. It has taken on an almost mystical quality. Perhaps it's just nostalgia for my own childhood Christmases, those candlelit nights on the church pew between my mom and my sister and my grandparents, when the air felt thick with holiness and magic, but I think there's something more. Tonight and tomorrow, tonightandtomorrow, two days that become one, knit together so close that we can't see the seam.

When does tonight become tomorrow? Is it the first breath of the baby? Or the moment when Mary wraps him up in the bands of cloth Luke so carefully describes? Maybe it's the moment the angel appears and declares the good news. Maybe it's the arrival of the shepherds in Bethlehem to see the child, or maybe it's when they finally head home and the little family of three is alone for the first time. Maybe it's the moment Mary gathers all these things and ponders them in her heart.

Is it the first glint of daybreak? The sun over the horizon? Maybe the stroke of midnight—but what is midnight if not a desperate attempt by humans to corral ethereal time? Our markers of time are arbitrary; we are forever at the mercy of the sun. Tonight never really becomes tomorrow. Tomorrow is always out there, just beyond our grasp.

But on Christmas Eve—at the breath of the baby or the song of the angel—tonight and tomorrow become one. Perhaps the holiness and the magic of this phrase are not nostalgia but an invitation to liminal time. It's an invitation to live in the already and not yet that encompasses the Christian faith. A savior is born for us—the angel declared it—and still, there is no peace on earth. We sing joy to the world, and still the world is broken. We turn up the lights at the end of the service and find that we are still the same people, still hurting and lonely and grieving and worried, but now we know that God is here. Now we have a story to tell.

Perhaps those of us who have peeked into the manger now understand something new. Tonight and tomorrow, we can glimpse the now and the later, the present and the future, the thin space between heaven and earth. And so we pray like the ones who stand watch, the ones on duty tonight and tomorrow, the ones who are ready to respond.