

The Eve of the Feast of the Nativity  
December 24, 2017  
Isaiah 9:2-7 / Luke 2:1-20  
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***“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”***

Our journey to Bethlehem began a long time ago, in a land far, far away from Chambersburg. It was a time of great discouragement and disarray for the people of Judah in the 8<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era, centuries before Jesus' birth. The people were living in political darkness, either because of oppression from a foreign power or through idol worship - that is trusting in powers other than God, including trusting the untrustworthy behavior of their own rulers. Hopes ran high that things would be different with the enthronement of a new king. Scholars are not sure who that king was at the time of this writing from First Isaiah. Whoever it was, these words from Isaiah 9 likely were read aloud at the coronation of this, and every new king.

The people understood, so they said, that the king was *NOT* God, but they certainly longed and yearned for a new king who would act in their behalf, just like God would. Great gifts came with the coronation of a new king. It was like turning a new page, a “do over”, a chance to get things right this time. A new king would order an end to warfare - no more invasions and pillaging and burning villages. The remnants of weapons of warfare left behind would be burned because there would no longer be any need for such weapons.

We have to give credit to our ancient Hebrew ancestors in the faith. They were people who persisted, stubbornly held out great dreams for new leadership. Ideally, the king would be a leader who pointed to God and would bring the people under God's governance and authority. Even if it was a child king coming to the throne, he was given the names reserved for royalty: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Early in their life as a faith community, Israel had asked God for a king like other nations had, though God was not keen on granting them what they asked for. They had high hopes and great expectations. And they had no idea how much trouble kings could get them into! After the great King David, the long line of kings who followed were mostly corrupt. Occasionally there was a good king who cared for the people.

Isaiah's words reach out across time, from a history of agony toward persistent hope, hope that hangs on. Sadly, theirs was an unrealistic hope beyond the ability of any earthly monarchy to deliver.

*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."*

Tonight, there may be those among us who have come here living in some shadow of darkness that weighs heavily on your hearts. At the same time, many of us want a glimpse of God to reassure or convince ourselves that God is holy and gracious, and totally for us and with us.

Some of us have lost loved ones in the past year and feel bent low with sadness and grief. I have noticed this Advent season an increased number of ads publicizing alternative Christmas services, called "Blue Christmas" services. These services are designed for anyone who cannot or does not want to settle for putting on a happy celebratory face to make it look like everything in their life is fine. In a Blue Christmas service you can be real, and don't have to pretend. For some, Christmas this year will not be a season full of joy, gladness, and merrymaking.

Perhaps you or someone close to you has recently received a serious medical diagnosis that leaves you worriedly brooding in the dark, anxious about the future and what might lie ahead.

Some here may struggle in the darkness with an addiction or a difficult mental health diagnosis. Some may live daily in the darkness, victims of domestic violence or some other form of abuse.

Wherever we are, it's good that we have come together on this night to recall that long ago night in Bethlehem when our Lord was born. With our unspoken desires and yearning hearts, we have come. While we are not ruled by kings in the United States, we need to hear again that our God has acted to give what royal human rulers could never give: peace, joy, truth, light, eternal love, and God's very own presence. The celebration tonight is about a birth, not an enthronement. We celebrate the coming of God's light into the dark night of our need, and here we search together for a glimpse of God.

Mary and Joseph made the eighty mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted for the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. The only place they can find rest for the night is a cave where the animals are sheltered and fed. There, Mary gives birth and

lays her infant son Jesus in a feed trough, because there was no room for them anywhere else.

Meanwhile, out in the fields, the darkness of nighttime has fallen. The working stiffs, the shepherds are minding their flock when they are visited by an angel of the Lord. The darkness of the night sky is lit up by the glory of the Lord shining around them. And the first words the angel speaks are, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. In the city of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born. *Here is the sign you should look for: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger*”. This is your sign, says the angel.

No rousing music of pomp and ceremony, no security guards, no repeated flash of news cameras to help lead the shepherds to their destination? This sign is so very ordinary, not like the usual public fanfare when a visiting dignitary is welcomed. Here’s your sign: a newly born baby, wrapped tightly in strips of cloth. A baby in a manger, resting in an animal’s feedbox. Really? A Savior has come into the world just like all humans enter the world, as a baby. Vulnerable and helpless? Totally dependent on his parents, who have to make a bed for him in the place where animals are fed. This is not a Savior who turns aside or is a stranger to the harshness of life. This holy Child is laid down among simple people, amid their real everyday struggles.

Luke’s details of Jesus’ birth remind us that the gospel has always been set amid world events. And God regularly shows up where we least expect God to be, and God is always for us. God loves this world, and will not give up on it, or us.

There are days when the world’s darkness seems so much more pronounced than the light. But this story we hear tonight was made for just such times – to shine light in dark places, to bring hope to the discouraged, insight to the lost, and the promise of peace to all who long for it.

The gospel writer of John says, “What has come into being in him (the Word) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Among the many carols of the Christmas season, a few remind us that no matter how dark it seems around us, God’s light and goodness will prevail. We sing it in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*: “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

We proclaim it in the hymn *Break forth, O beauteous Heavenly Light*: “This child, this little helpless boy, shall be our confidence and joy. The power of Satan breaking, our peace eternal making.”

And in the closing hymn of tonight’s service, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, listen for this phrase: “Risen with healing in his wings, light and life to all he brings; hail, the Sun of Righteousness, hail the heaven born Prince of Peace.” It’s a declaration of confidence in God who has acted to put things right with the world.

These carols are our prayers sung. They are like vitamins for our spirits. They tell us once again: No darkness - not the darkness of empire. Not the darkness of violence, addiction, or the darkness of a tomb will keep out God’s light. Not the shadows of confusion, grief, feeling lost or lonely can keep God from coming to us. We need not fear, for on us light has shined!

Humbly, vulnerably, helpless as every human baby comes into this world - Jesus came to be God with us and for us – for now and always. Feast on the light and love of God’s holy presence here at the table as you receive the bread of life and cup of salvation. Come in awe and wonder. Come to pray and ponder what this means for your life, and for our world. Come to praise and give thanks.

“Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”  
Amen.