

Christmas Eve, 12.24.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

“Light in the Darkness”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

A Blessed Christmas to you all! Imagine with me, a satellite view of the planet Earth on Christmas Eve as a satellite moves across Asia, Africa, Europe, and then across the Americas as the world moves toward tomorrow, Christmas Day. Imagine with me that, as the satellite moves over the nations, small points of light begin to illumine the darkness as churches and Christians light candles, celebrating the birth of Jesus, the light of the world.

Though December 25th is Christmas Day, nearly every church in every nation around the world gathers on Christmas Eve to hear again the story of the first Christmas. There were shepherds watching their flocks at night and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. An angel of the Lord appeared, saying, “*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*”

Jesus’ birth comes as good news of light in the darkness. Tonight “good news of great joy” drives out fear, giving hope and peace to a weary world. This is the reason why we gather at night with Christians around the world: we remind ourselves that the light that enlivens every person is coming into the world in Jesus Christ.

As Isaiah writes, “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them has light shined.*” On this holy night, good news of light in the darkness is spoken in every nation and in every language. As Paul writes to Titus, “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all!*” Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, brings salvation for all people in this world.

So like people in Asia, Africa, Europe, and everywhere around the world, we will also light candles as a sign that the light of Christ shines in the darkness of our world. At the end of this evening’s service, I will take a small flame from the Christ candle and pass it to the congregation so that you might share the light of Christ with one another. This is not simply a sentimental moment; rather, it is a profound reminder that Jesus, the light of the world, comes to illumine our hearts so that with our voices and hands we might share the light of Christ with our neighbor every day.

It fascinates me that God chose to announce the birth of Jesus at night. As modern people we

have more or less, through technology and electricity, tamed the darkness of night. Our cities really no longer sleep at night as goods are transported and distribution hubs hum with activity all through the night. Yet, on this night, why is it that we briefly turn off our technology in order that we might light candles in the darkness?

We do this to remind ourselves of the power of one small flame to give light and hope in the darkness. We do this to realize again that all of our small flames together can offer hope to the world. In passing the light of Christ from one candle to another, we remind ourselves that we are to share the light of Christ with others, by becoming light in the darkness. The light of Christ isn't just a warm symbol; Jesus Christ, the light of the world, is a *living reality* who can change our lives and this world, if we but allow him into our hearts and carry this light into the world every day.

You have no idea what a joy it is to stand among you tonight. These last two years have not only been difficult; they have been dark. The planet Earth has been covered by the darkness of a pandemic and the fear of death. Like the words of Psalm 23, we have been walking through the valley of the shadow of death. We have also been living through a time of tremendous division, strife and mistrust. As if the darkness of illness were not enough, we have been at enmity with one another. The words of Isaiah, about "*people walking in darkness*" and "*living in a land of deep darkness*" are still an accurate description of our world.

The good news of this holy night is not simply a quaint old story or a cultural ritual. Tonight, we hear again good news of great joy for all the people of this world in all of their diversity. In a world of human sinfulness, hatred, oppression and violence – Isaiah's words about a land of deep darkness hold up a mirror to our human condition.

Luke's gospel speaks of the historicity of this night: "*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.*" By writing this, Luke is setting the story of Jesus within human history. Luke is telling us that Jesus was born in and for all human history. Jesus was born into a land occupied by the Roman Empire, and to Jewish people who were oppressed by imperial power. Luke is telling us that Jesus is born for all people living in the darkness of human sin and the fear of death. For all of our technology and advancement – we are in need of light that the darkness can never overcome.

500 years ago on Christmas in 1521, Martin Luther preached a Christmas sermon about tonight's gospel in which Luther wrote, "The Gospel does not merely teach about the history of Christ. No, it enables all who believe, to receive it as their own...Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had

been born a thousand times...if I were never to hear that he was born for me and to be my very own?" The good news of the birth of Christ Jesus is not simply a historic record of the past; it is good news that Jesus lives for you and for me, sharing our humanity.

Luther continued, "Of what benefit is it to your neighbor if you build a church entirely out of gold? ...Of what benefit to your neighbor are the glitter and ceremonies of the church, the clergy's robes, and the sanctuary? Do you think that God wants to be served with...such fancies? God has commanded none of these, but only that if you see your neighbor...in sin or in suffering in body and soul, you are to leave everything else and at once help your neighbor in every way within your power, and if you can do no more, help your neighbor with words of comfort and prayer. Thus Christ has done for you, giving you an example to follow."

Tonight 500 Christmases later, the Christmas story remains unchanged: we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. We worship Christ in this beautiful sanctuary so that forgiven and renewed by grace, we might serve alongside Christ Jesus helping others in the darkness of the world. As we have received his light into our lives, we are to share his light and love with our neighbor who is in need.

So as you receive and pass along a small candle flame in tonight's service, remember the source of this light, Christ Jesus. Jesus is born to give light to the manger of your heart. Jesus is born to be light for you in the darkness. Is there room in the "Inn of Your Heart" for Jesus – not only tonight but every day? Jesus comes to you again tonight, knocking on the door of your heart asking for a place to stay. Let him in. Allow the small flame of his light to illumine you and your life and through you, to become light in the darkness for others.

After the angel spoke to the shepherds, they said, "*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*" So they went and saw Mary, Joseph and the Christ-child lying in the manger. The shepherds shared the light of this story with others.

After the Christmas tree is taken down and the decorations put away, the light of Christ will continue to light your way in the darkness. Like the shepherds, we are people living and working in the darkness of the world, and upon us has light shined.

Christmas is about sharing the light of Christ with others. Jesus is the greatest gift you will ever receive. Live as light in the darkness for others. Share the gift of Christ's light with others.

Be light in the darkness. Amen.