

THE BIRTH OF THE LIGHT

Familiarity breeds contempt.” Repetition has a way of hammering the excitement out of things that were once exciting and beauty out of things that once seemed beautiful to us. Someone who passes Niagara Falls on the way to work each day soon stops noticing that it’s even there. Sunshine in December is precious to us in northeast Ohio, but people in Phoenix take it for granted. The same principle applies to church worship: what you do every week gets to be old hat after awhile. I suspect that the real reason some of you only come to church on Christmas Eve and Easter is that you’d rather be entertained twice a year than bored 52 times a year! At least that’s the most positive construction I can place on your motives!

Still, as many times as we hear the Christmas story, it has the power to move us. Luke’s simple account of Mary and Joseph and the Christ child born in a manger touches us at some level no matter how many times we hear it. And there’s a reason for that: you see, it’s the most important news you and I will ever hear. The events that took place a few miles outside of Jerusalem a little over two thousand years ago changed the entire course of human history. More to the point, it changes everything for you and me.

The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah described the events that would take place in Bethlehem over seven hundred years before they took place. He wrote, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”* Now when Isaiah referred to *“The people walking in darkness and living in the land of the shadow of death”*—he was not only describing the people of his own time and the people of 1st century Israel, he was describing people who live all over the world today. Most of the people in the world may rise with the sun every morning, but they walk in darkness all day long as they make their way through the valley of the shadow of death. They can steer a straight course by sunlight, but without God, they stumble about in spiritual darkness.

Mankind has done well in many ways using God’s gift of the light of reason to make his life better. Reason gave us science and science has brought many benefits to mankind. Among many other things, it has given us safer, healthier and longer lives in this world. But reason has generally failed when it comes to improving man’s moral and spiritual condition. In that arena the facts tell a very different story. Reason has failed to eliminate war and famine and oppression and slavery, which continue to cast their dark shadow over the nations. In the 20th Century alone, humanity was ravaged by more war, torture, rapine and genocide than in all previous history. That, my friends, is not light—it is darkness—darkness that afflicts people all over the world every day.

This darkness, this pall that covers the nations, doesn’t come from “out there”; it emanates from us—an inner darkness that enshrouds the souls of mankind, a darkness that the Bible calls *sin*. Greed, lust, anger, envy, sloth, pride—all the deadly sins that infect the human soul--these sins are the nuclear core of the all the personal and social

pathologies that hold us in thrall: anxiety, depression, crime, corruption, terrorism. And they are all the handiwork of our common enemy, Satan, who continually sows seeds of sin and dysfunction in us and then waters those seeds with pride and unbelief. The seeds then sprout and bloom and release the poisonous vapors of war and rapine and genocide and tyranny that bathe the world in misery.

So it is an inner darkness that generates the evils that plague mankind and the source of this inner darkness is the human heart. As Jesus said, “...*the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony slander. These are what make a man unclean...*” Unless the human heart be enlightened, it remains a black hole in our nature. But if the light of God’s grace shines into that heart the darkness will be dispersed and it will become a fountainhead of light. It was just that light that burst forth in Bethlehem almost two thousand years ago, a light that brought “...the dawn of redeeming grace.” (*Silent Night*) It was the light of a Savior—the Sun of Righteousness—who came to illumine this dark world with the bright light of God’s love and mercy and peace. From heaven above He came to atone for all human sins so that there might be peace between man and God.

The darkness of natural man’s heart cannot stand against the bright light of God’s grace. Like the bugs that live beneath a rock, human sins and the dark motives they generate in the human soul go scurrying away when the rock is lifted and they are exposed to the light of truth. This is what Jesus meant when he said that those who continue in His Word will know the truth and the truth will set them free. (*John 8:31-32*) Freedom, truth, light and grace—these are the riches that Christ brings to the human heart.

The light can come suddenly and dramatically or it can come gradually and quietly like the dawn. But whether it comes suddenly or gradually, it comes quietly, illuminating the heart and mind and enabling those who were blind to see clearly at last.

It’s never been said better than in the words of the Christmas Carol we will sing in a few minutes: “*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given; So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven; No ear may hear His coming, yet in this world of sin; Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.*”

I wish you all a blessed Christmas! Amen.

Isaiah 9:1-7

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the

fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

1 John 1:1-5

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.