

Our Light Amidst Darkness

Christmas Eve, Dec. 24th, 2017 – Brad Bailey

[Note: These texts were read earlier in service: Isaiah 9:2,6; John 1:4-5,9; Luke 2:8-20]

Also – There is more here in notes than time allowed to share...but hopefull is still helpful in offering plenty of ideas one can draw from.]

Intro:

It is truly a joy to gather with you today / this evening...on Christmas Eve... the day in which **anticipation unfolds into the actual celebration of Christmas.**

There's been a flurry of preparing for the cultural forms of celebration ... and that process can get a little crazy.

We live in a time in which there is **chaos of activity...and even the symbols. I know that some of you may have gotten the Star Wars Nativity set. Hey I am not judging you. And Americans have exported this confusion of symbols. In one large Japanese department store a guy saw a display featuring [1]....**

Santa Claus.... holding the infant Jesus.... in a sleigh... pulled by the seven dwarfs.

But at it's best...I like both dimensions of Christmas...the cultural traditions ...time with family... gift giving... but also the deeper. It's my belief that the **cultural sentiments can be **enjoyed most** when **we grasp the deeper substance.****

I've come to find that the **cultural aspects are just echoes of the deeper...and they will never fully satisfy in themselves.**

As an end in themselves...they can never fully satisfy us. But when we engage the deeper aspect of Christmas... we can actually enjoy the cultural aspects for what they are... that which points to something deeper.

- **The family time**...whether that is a time of warmth or wanting... it's only a small reflection of a Father whose love has come to gather his children forever.
- **The lights**...when they reflect something of hope penetrating the darkness...remember they are a symbol of eternal light...
- **If we have gifts to open**...when that last gift is open...and you think... it's over... nothing more? You can realize that so much more was already given. **All the gifts between us are only small tokens of what God has given to us.**

So today / tonight we gather **to engage the deeper meaning of Christmas.**

Summed up well in one line of the classic Christmas carol....[2]

The song "O Little Town of Bethlehem" declares:

"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

What a potent and powerful declaration.

It affirms that we live with **deep and defining hope...and fears**...and that they were **met in the timeless moment** that we stop and celebrate here.

“Hopes and fears...”

Hope that there is more...and the fears that arise to denounce such hope.

Two forces that exist in each of us.

Precisely the **relationship between light and darkness... one a force of hope and one of fear.**

We might not think of darkness as central to Christmas...but it is the backdrop from which light comes. [3]

And it's served well by celebrating during the solstice...when the days are shortest and the nights are longest. And it's into that darkness that lights are placed.

As we heard read...Among so many prophecies which spoke of this central event of the divine drama ... including where and how such events would take place.... It is described as a great light coming into our darkness.

Isaiah 9:2,6

**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....**

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,

This is the great news of Christmas...that light has come...and come to those in darkness.

“Jesus said, ‘I have come as a light to shine in this dark world so that all who put their trust in Me will no longer wander in darkness.’ - John 12:46

In entering our world, God has become our Light amidst darkness.

Like that grand description of creation itself... when it says that upon creating the heavens and the earth.. God said, “Let there be light” and there was light...so God saw a darkened world Darkened by our separation from Him... and sent forth his Word... as Jesus is described, as a light into the world.... a light for our spiritual darkness.

He is speaking **not** about **physical darkness**...but the **inner darkness** of the **soul**... and **spirit**.

And what happens if you are in a level of darkness for a long time?

Our eyes adjust to so little light they don't realize the effects of the darkness.

So before we light the candles that accompany our celebration of light...we must grasp the experience of darkness.

What happens when you everything around you becomes dark?

1. Darkness encloses us

The darkness in our world encloses us...darkness makes our reality smaller

No matter how large a space you may be in...when darkness surrounds you... the space is lost...you feel enclosed. The world gets smaller.

You can only see what is close at hand.

The people of Israel...once engaged by the creator of all...told of a future so expansive... bless the whole world... and know a future in which there would be **peace forever.**

History without end... but now their world has been enclosed...they are not a nation expanding...but a people only allowed to exist within the confines of Rome who rules over them.

That is what the darkness of this world can do to any of us. Our world's can feel smaller... we don't see the boundless reality of eternity...but the uncertainty all around us.

Maybe you have felt the loss of expanse... lost a loved one... a job... financial security... you feel the limits of your longevity.

Tonight...God says...I've come to make your world bigger.

Another aspect of darkness, is that...

2. Darkness diminishes our freedom and control

Darkness generally diminishes one's sense of being in control.

When someone is placed in **solitary confinement...** it's **often accompanied with darkness ...**that adds to one feeling they are **not in control of where they are.**

When one is told **"you will never see the light of day"**...**what does it convey?**

It declares that one has lost their freedom...their power to live as a free person.

The people of Israel... become enslaved... living under the rule of the Roman Empire... oppressed.

Consider the unique moment in human history. It is quite fascinating to consider that among the many ways that the birth of Christ is the most unique event in history...is the unique history it is set within.

The Scriptures tell us that at the right time... Christ came. There are many reason why the time may have been right...but perhaps most fascinating is that what becomes clear is that human pride and power had reached a profound height.

Roman Empire began with conquering lands and taking masses of slaves...then expanding by force... . Rome was birthed in it's military power to conquer... and dedications were made to the gods of war... but as it expanded it proclaimed that peace was found in the control of Rome (Pax Romana)...but it was peace that came only with allegiance to the empire. To ensure that no one would defy the empire, they developed the most public form of humiliating death... crucifixion....death on a cross for all to be clear about who ruled.

When Julius Caesar was killed... His adopted son... Caesar Augustus became the next emperor...as Rome reached a vastness unsurpassed.

He began ruling in 27BC... united all of the empire ...from Britain to India... most of the known world.

His father had been designated the divine...a god...and so Caesar Augustus found the opportunity to be declared "the son of God."

To mark his birth...he declared 12 days of advent... and the Roman Empire minted an advent coin that read **“Salvation is to be found in no other save Augustus.”** [4]

And with such massive pursuits...he needed to know how much he could collect in taxes...so he called for everyone living within the empire to be counted. At their places of birth. It is that which forced Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem his home town...where Jesus would be born.

It was at just such a time when human pride and pretense arose that you can almost imagine God saying...“It’s time”....to confront such darkness. [5]

So the Jewish people knew the darkness that diminishes our freedom and control

When human pride and power takes it’s toll... one can lose their own sense of fight.

When **Winston Churchill** saw the **expanding powers** that were **denying freedom** across Europe...which would lead to World War II, he said **“The light has gone out in Europe.”**

Some of you may feel that way about your life.

Today...many feel the powers of human pride and power are destined to rule the world. You may feel like there is **no use fighting** against what seems to be ruling this world.

> But God says...think again...the hopes and fear of ALL the years is met in one who came that night.

And a final aspect of darkness, is that...

**3. Darkness isolates us... ...causing the separation of being alone.
...abandoned.**

We might enjoy a broad landscape under the full moon...but greater **darkness isolates us...we want to know “is anybody there?”**

In the darkness we can sense how alone we may be.

At the time of Christ’s birth... **the people felt the power of such isolation.**

They were being **cut off from the expanse....abandoned.**

They had been birthed by God’s calling... first to Abraham...but then through all the prophets and priests and works of God. **But Israel was now experiencing the reality of the darkness they had entered.**

God had not spoken for 400 years. God has warned them of becoming cut off.

The darkness bring silence...and silence is the ultimate isolation. [6]

And when we face the darkness of space...but also of soul...we can sense that we are ultimately alone.

This is the darkness into which the light of Christmas has come.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. - John 1:9

As that great Christmas hymn declares....

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Not met in **enlightened ideas.**

Not met in **political ideas.**

Met **IN HIM** tonight...in God himself coming.

And the light of Christ that enters the darkness of our world...and meets the hopes and fears of all the years.

1. The Light of Christ opens our world to eternity

In Christ...**the eternal entered the created world.**

What was inside that manger was bigger than the whole world.

God... who is outside the bounds of time and space...entered our time and space.

The eternal power which created the universe... entered the womb of human life.

He didn't just enter... he brought eternal life with him.

To a darkened world enclosed...to your darkened world... the light of Christ has come to overcome the darkness...and to **open your life to that of eternal life.**

The forces which enclose the world in space and time are overtaken by God.

This is what **Jesus was so clear about**...the **kingdom of God was now at hand.**

The world was no longer bound... death was defeated.

John 17:3

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

We think of eternal life as simply a future...but it already exists...and Jesus reveals that it is not so much about where you are...but who you are in relationship to. God is eternal...and we join eternity when we are in relationship to him.

Of course death seems to be the ultimate enclosure of life. But that is why Jesus confronts death. He bears the consequences of our separation from God...and then rises from the dead.

As the Scriptures say [7]...

2 Timothy 1:10

He has broken the power of death and brought life and immortality to light.

He has **brought immortality to light.**

Jesus reveals that God has overcome the separation that death represents. He has come as a savior...to bear that separation ...and offer eternal life.

Christmas brings the reality that **our world is so much bigger** than we could have imagined. Reality is **infinitely bigger.**

You were meant to live beyond the bounds of space and time as we know it.

The door to our enclosed lives is open to all who will chose to follow him.

2. The Light of Christ brings freedom from the powers of this world.

The events by which God entered our world are a declaration that human might does not rule the world. Listen...we associate power with human prestige, strength, wealth education ...and God chooses to be born to a now oppressed powerless people...and peasants among them...to a teenager girl...not even married yet...and under the ruling demand to travel for a tax census. Why...to confront the pride and pretense of human power.

No ruler has arguably ever ruled a wider and more dominating empire in all of human history than... Caesar Augustus... and he is best known...for having existed during the time of Christ.

Herod... sought to kill...

Soon forgotten.

Rome soon fallen.

As has been declared...

“All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.” (Adapted from a sermon by Dr James Allan Francis)

“The Incomparable Christ”

He never marshaled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who have, under His orders, made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired.”

“The names of the past proud statesmen of Greece and Rome have come and gone. Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him.

“He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, and feared by devils, as the living, personal Christ, our Lord and Savior.’ [8]

What a testimony of power beyond the forces of this world.

And that power came as a light to overcome the dark and intimidating powers for all time.

John 1:4-5 - “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.”

“Light has come and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

There is a power that is greater than all the pride and control of his world.

In Christ there is **freedom from the powers that oppress.**

In Christ there is **strength.** The power of Christ is alive and present and able to stand against all the powers you and I will face.

A verse in the Bible that says describes how we can live is **Philippians 4:13**... out of the Amplified translation..

“I have the strength for all things in Christ who empowers me. I’m ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses inner strength into me.” - Philippians 4:13

Not some things.... But all things. Whatever might appear challenging in the new year that is coming.

And this leads to the final aspect of darkness...that of being alone.

The light of Christ brings the power to overcome the separation and isolation of our existence.

3. The Light of Christ brings the presence of God’s love

.... the personal and present love of God

This is what the prophets described...and what heavenly messengers declared....

“they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23 (NLT))

God WITH us.

The nature of God... is that which we in our finite and unaligned condition could never be reconciled with. He is described as an unapproachable light. (1 Timothy 6:13-16) That means that God transcends us and is totally beyond us. And as **“a consuming fire”** ([Heb. 12:29](#)).

But Christ has come to bring the presence of God’s love.

I will forever wonder at the **source of all life actually entering life.**

The infinite **caring about** the finite.

> This is not about an impersonal relationship...but actually the very source of my personhood and yours.

I believe **you are more than an organism...**I believe **you are a person.**

The design always reflects the designer. We are persons because the source of our lives is personal.

God is not simply an impersonal force...nor are you. He is a personal being from which we have become personal beings.

> And this is what **Christmas brings... the personal and present love of God.**

The light of Christ brings the power to overcome the separation and isolation of our existence...with the personal and present love of God.

And it wasn’t just a moment...he came to take residence in all who receive him. He was very clear....that His spirit would be with them...

Matthew 28:20

“Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We wonder...how close can God be....and how do we relate to such a presence?

I think Mary, the one to whom God first came... to serve as the mother of Jesus... reflects a clear picture.

How personal and present is God? As close as a life living within us.

Does that mean it will always be clear?

Most imagine...Mary couldn't have understood how this could really be possible.

Mary had to ask.... "how can this be...I haven't had physical relations with a man...so I can't be pregnant?"...to which there is rebuke...but a reminder... look ...your cousin who bore John the Baptist was barren...and now is 6 months pregnant...all things are possible with God. In other words...there is more than you can ever understand...but look at what you do know.

Why her...why not others... why don't others understand....why before she was married... why such hardship...?

She could only hold onto what she knew... she had to trust what she didn't understand by what she did understand.

I believe **that may speak to many of us**...we all have things we don't fully understand. But ultimately it is **not merely a matter of understanding...but of responding to what we do know.**

It's the challenge to understand something ...but realizing it's not so much because it's less true than your reality....but more true than your reality.

It doesn't so much go against what we understand as much as it is beyond human understanding.

So it is with the Light of God...it lights the path we need...

But she did say yes.

Luke 1:38

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Mary's response says it all... "**I am the Lord's servant,**" Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

With these words...Mary forever joins the drama of Christmas

Mary places her life in God, and God places his life in her.

There lies the secret of a truly "Mary" Christmas...It's about placing our life in God, so that he can place his life in us.

.....by the Holy Spirit he seeks to come to all.

"The hopes and fears of all your years were met in Bethlehem. But, as the carol promises, "*where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*"

CLOSING:

John 8:12; 12:44-46

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.

This is the gift of Christmas. It is given to each of us personally.

Prayer:

Would you pray this prayer in your heart? Would you for the next thirty seconds kind of tune out all the noises around you...and within you? Would you give thirty seconds of uninterrupted attention to God – just Him and you? He knows your thoughts. He knows what you're thinking.

Would you say something like this in your heart "God, I want to know You. As I prepare to enter the new year ahead... I want to know ... not just know about You.

I want to know Your plan for my life. And the purpose that You made me for."

Would you just say that? Would you say, "Jesus Christ, I don't understand it all but as much as I know how I open up my life to You.

I want to receive your light ...and to follow you light...as best as I know how.

Resources:

Notes:

1. Mohler is Associate Editor of Preaching, Preaching, Vol. 7, #3+

2. Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) wrote this beloved Christmas hymn for his Philadelphia parish, Holy Trinity Church, following a pilgrimage to Bethlehem in 1865, according to British hymnologist J. R. Watson. According to the story, Brooks traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

"Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds. . . . Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still 'keeping watch over their flocks,' or leading them home to fold."

Brooks participated in the Christmas Eve service, writes hymnologist Albert Bailey, "conducted in . . . Constantine's ancient basilica (326 A.D.) built over the traditional site of the Nativity, a cave. The service lasted from 10 P.M. to 3 A.M.!" This sequence of events provided the backdrop for Brooks' children's hymn. – From - <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-little-town-of-bethlehem>

I found a message by Betsy Childs Howard that offered a good capturing of Christ's fulfillment of "the hopes and fears of all the years" which includes:

Jesus fulfills the hopes of all the years in a specific way; he is the long-awaited Messiah. His coming had first been promised to Adam and Eve in [Genesis 3:15](#). His birth—of a virgin in the city of David—had been foretold by prophets centuries before ([Isa. 7:14](#), [Mic. 5:2](#)). Jesus was the promised lamb of God, the hope of Israel, pictured for years through sacrifice at Passover. He fulfills the hopes of all the years that our sins would be laid on him who alone is able to bear the wrath of God.

Though at Christmas we may remember him as a baby, he is the baby who came to make right what's wrong with the world. The same infant born in a Bethlehem stable would, as a man, carry a cross down Jerusalem's streets to Golgotha, where he died as the ultimate Passover sacrifice.

We can also be comforted by the idea that Jesus assuages our fears.

If your greatest fear is... loneliness or rejection, Jesus has answered that fear. Through Jesus, we have been so loved by God that nothing in creation can separate us from him ([Rom. 8:39](#)).

If you fear storms and tempests, Jesus has the power to calm them with a word ([Matt. 8:26](#)). Worried that your needs might not be met? Jesus has promised that his Father will meet our material needs ([Matt. 6:33](#)).

Fearful of death? Jesus has conquered it ([1 Cor. 15:54](#)). Death is no longer terminal.

The birth of this baby in Bethlehem pierced the darkness of our fears the way a lit match overtakes the darkness of a cavern. Its light may be small, but darkness cannot overcome light, and the light of a match leads to a roaring, blazing glow.

3. We tend to think that at Christmas...everything is supposed to be "different".

- Death should cease. Funerals should be on stand-by until after the New Year.
- No one should get a "pink slip" at work during December.
- The word "divorce" shouldn't to be mentioned in any home throughout Advent.
- Every emergency room should be empty -- because no one need be injured over the holidays!

But Christmas is not about the absence of fear...or darkness...it's about the greater presence of hope and light.

4. <https://forums.catholic.com/t/jesus-christ-and-caesar-augustus/293056/5>

5. And what of the Jewish people who had been expanding? They were placed under the rule of the more local King...King Herod...King of Judea...who ruthlessly gained power...in part through the killing of 45 Sadducean priests who had supported the opposition...and who appropriated the mantle "King of the Jews" for himself...though not a Jew.

He also married a Jewish woman, Mariamne, and had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus (though he later killed all three because they threatened his rule).

So when the Magi (wise men from the East) arrived in Jerusalem, inquiring about where they could find the recently born "King of the Jews" so that they could worship him, Herod became deeply threatened that his subjects would claim another king...so to be sure that such an infant would not survive...he ordered all the male infants under the age of two in the then small village they had identified...to be killed.

6. The last word spoken by the last prophet Malachi... spoke once again of another coming.

Malachi 4:4-6 (NIV)

⁴ "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

And this is how John the Baptist is described as that forerunner...

Luke 1:16-17 (NIV)

¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

7. Note that what Paul expounds upon is the wider grasp that God had provided beyond anything we did or deserved. It was grace...planned long ago. As the extended text describes, the "He" is referring to God...but through Christ.

2 Timothy 1:9-10 (NLT)

For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ And now he has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.

8 And another note...

Today, all we see of ancient Rome is ruins. Caesar's mighty legions and the pomp of Roman imperial power have faded into oblivion. Yet how is Jesus remembered today? What is his enduring influence?

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, "The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy."²
- His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals.
- Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in his name. Over 100 great universities — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford – were begun by his followers.³
- The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. (Women in Jesus' day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed.)
- Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus' teaching that each human life is valuable.

Amazingly, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry. When noted author and world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, "By this test Jesus stands first."⁴

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes of him, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries... It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray." <http://y-jesus.com/what-impact-has-jesus-had-on-the-world/>