

*The Prophecies of Christmas, Pt. 4*

***The Light of Love***

*Isaiah 9: 1-2, 6-7*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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This morning we lit the fourth candle of advent, the candle of love. All month long we light flames as the dark of the year closes about us. Today, on the eve of Christmas, we rejoice that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. This is the light of the love of God who gave his only Son to redeem us. Isaiah prophesied, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” Matthew’s gospel quotes this passage directly as Jesus begins his ministry. He is the light of the world who shines in our darkness. He brings love into loneliness. He lights a way home for the lost. He gives the hope of dawn in all our inky midnights.

When I teach in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade confirmation class, I often tell how, at their age, I sometimes got up in the middle of the night and went creeping around the house in the dark. I ask the students if they’ve ever done that. Parents, here’s a dose of reality for you: *all* your children have walked alone in the dark through your house! So we talk about what it’s like to be in a place so familiar to you, yet so strange because of the dark. Familiar furniture becomes dark shadows. The buzz of the house in the day becomes the eerie silence of midnight. As the house settles, it pops and creaks. You can think someone else is also walking around in the dark. What was known becomes strange. You feel lost even at home.

That’s our backdrop for considering the great verse from Psalm 23: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me.* The valley of the shadow of death describes so many situations.

- Of course it means the *shadow of mortality* under which we all live. The awareness we come to early on that life dies. Animals die. People die. *I will die.* That dread hangs upon every person from childhood on up.
- The deep darkness can mean the way you *feel lost* in your own skin. You go through the motions of life, but you’re just not there. You don’t feel like

you fit. You don't know where you're going. You can't find your way back home.

- The darkness can be *ignorance*. You don't know what you don't know. Except that you feel there's something missing. These are the days when you don't know that God exists. That God loves you. That God wants to lead you into more life. Before the light shines in your mind, you're just trying around little stories by which you try to live, but always leave you empty.
- The darkness can be *despair*. In Psalm 139, David considers what it means to feel about his life, "Surely the darkness shall overcome me, and the light about me be night." I'm just sinking into grief. The world is going dark. I'm sliding into depression. The doors are closing on me. I don't think I can get out. Psalm 88 concludes with this stark loneliness: "Darkness has become my only companion."
- The darkness can be the cycle of endlessly repeated *bad choices*. Fearing abandonment, you do things that make people abandon you. Being mistreated, you keep falling for people who mistreat you more. Trying to draw close to end the loneliness, you keep smothering people. Feeling horrible about yourself, you keep speaking cruelly of others, and so feel worse. Wanting to numb the pain of intimate wounds, you keep erecting impenetrable walls whenever someone gets too near. The darkness keeps closing in.

Once I talked with a woman who had passed through several years of suffocating depression. I asked her how the turn came. She said, "I came to believe that there was something more than the darkness. I became willing to hope that there was something worth leaving the dark cave to find. I came to believe, for the first time in years, that it would be better to live in the light than in the dark. I received a small hope that it might be possible. And then I moved towards that light."

This is the message of Christmas. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. For unto us a child is born. To us, a son is given. Conception of life is a miracle. A child is a gift. You don't earn a child. You can't construct a new life. You make yourself available in love and receive the gift, should it come, on its own timetable. Light has to shine for the darkness to be dispelled. And that is always a gift.

Some family stories grow to legendary status. Especially the one about when I got lost in the NC woods with a nine-year-old godson, less than half a mile from the house. Logan and I had set off at the end of a short winter's afternoon. We weren't going far, just through some woods I had known for years. But then a rapid winter fog set in. Now the terrain is not level: even close to home you go up steep banks and down into low valleys, sometimes through thickets of rhododendrons. Suddenly, nothing looked familiar. Take one wrong hill, come down one wrong side and you can't recognize anything. I called Rhonda. She came out along the path and called to me. I heard her. We hiked towards her voice. But fog plays tricks with sound as well as sight. Each march left us farther from her voice. Night was falling and the temperature was dropping. It became clear to me that my 9 yr old godson and I were going to spend the night in the dark, wet woods as temperatures fell to the low 40's. We were going to sit in the darkness for 12 hours. Friendly woods began to feel haunted.

As we sat down in the fading dusk, I said, "Logan, I'm going to pray one more time." When I finished, he said, "Wow, Uncle Gerrit, you really meant it!" The truth was I had been praying for the last, lost hour, but all the time doing so pretty confident that I, the great woodsman, would find a way out. But when I had no hope, I prayed in the dark from my frightened guts. Then it occurred to me, with the last sliver of light that was left, just to see what was at the top of the bank. When I got up there, beyond hope, I saw lights in the dark. The neighbor was on a Gator with headlights, near home, not 200 yards away. "Logan, come on! There's a light! We're going home!"

You can get lost even very close to home. Familiar ground can become unfamiliar. And not all your power or mind or even technology can save you when the fog descends. All you can do is pray, pray from your guts. And hope. And wait, ready to move towards home should the light shine. The light, like a child, like the Son, is a gift. The light that shines in our darkness is the gift of a gracious God who sent his son into the shadow of death for us. The light is his Spirit that shines in our hearts so we can believe the gospel news. We don't make this up. We can't even make ourselves believe. All we can do is pray from our darkness. And then, should that light shine, get up and move towards it. These, then, are the questions on the Eve of our Christmas celebrations: do you see the light of Christ shining? Is the Spirit creating belief in you right now? Then go towards that light. Move towards Jesus with your whole heart and he will lead you home.