

“Seeing A Great Light”

Isaiah 9:2-7

December 24,2011

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

We meet here in the dark of night, yet we are not afraid nor do we feel uncomfortable. For, on our way here, we have seen a great amount of lights. Some think outdoor Christmas light decorations are out of control these days. Remember how lights used to be a few strands of colored lights hung on the gutters of our houses? Now, the displays keep getting bigger and bigger with more and more lights in more complex arrangements. Why? Two reasons: first of all, because we can, due to the improvements in technology. Second, the lights produce such a cheery and joyful mood during the dark nights of December. More lights equals more cheer. Brighter lights equals more joy. Without intending to do so, the world has gotten it right: this is the point of Christmas.

No one really likes darkness. It creates fear, not only for children but for some older people as well. Darkness is also dangerous because it hides those people and things which intend to harm you – wild animals, thieves, and so on. Total darkness causes separation for you from anyone and anything else. We rarely experience total darkness in our light infested age, but if you’ve ever been on a tour of a cavern where they shut off the lights, you know total darkness and total separation. Not only can you not see the person next to you, but you literally can’t see your hand in front of your face.

Darkness, therefore, is the perfect metaphor for sin and evil. Evil causes us to fear. Our sin is as dangerous like darkness. It causes our suffering and eventually leads to death. Like darkness, sin totally isolates us from God and each other. It is used several times in the Scriptures to refer to hell because hell is total separation from God.

We are all born into and live in that darkness. We may not think so or may try to deny it. But when fear strikes the heart; when our consciences experience guilt, when we are sad and depressed, or when we are afraid of death, that is evidence of the darkness in which we find ourselves and in the world.

Light, on the other hand, stands for all that is good. Light calms our fear and brings us joy and peace when it shines on us. We are safe when we are in the light. We won't run into anything and injure ourselves. Nothing can sneak up and harm us. Light unites us as we can see everyone around us. We are, therefore, comfortable in light,.

The good news of Christmas is all about light. In the Old Testament reading for Christmas Eve, Isaiah, the prophet, prophesies of something that so sure to happen that he uses the past tense, "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." God, like a great light, is intervening into our sin-darkened world to overcome the darkness in which we are trapped.

This will bring great joy for people. It will be like the joy farmers experience when the hard work of harvesting is completed or the joy soldiers experience when they divide the spoils of war after the victory has been won. To update it and bring it into the context of our holiday celebration: it will be like the joy when all the Christmas shopping, decorating, and baking is done or like the joy when all the presents are opened up. It will be a tremendous joy!

What is so joyful about it? This is the time of great deliverance. Isaiah uses imagery from Israel's time in slavery in Egypt where they wore the yoke of slavery, beaten by the rod of their oppressors, and led by the staff of their enemies. It will be like the days when Gideon and his three hundred man army blew their trumpets, smashed their clay bots, and waved their torches of light and defeated the huge Midianite army, thus rescuing Israel.

That which Isaiah prophesies will be even bigger and more joyful. When God brings light into this dark world, people will be freed from the yoke of sin and guilt, the rod of death and hell, and the staff of Satan's oppression.

Who will this mighty rescuer – the one greater than the great Gideon – be? It will not be a powerful military figure. It will not be a renowned hero. It will be a child. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;" This child is the virgin-born son given by God. This is Immanuel – God with us – born into the world this night. This is Jesus.

This baby, born in a stable and laid in a manger, would grow up and declare, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." How would he be the light of the world and bring us out of darkness? The four names prophesied of Him by Isaiah tell us.

He would be "Wonderful Counselor". "He will be most effective in planning, in formulating a plan for action. A great work is to be done by him, even the greatest ever attempted. But he had an adequate plan, the only one ever devised that measured up to the things to be attempted." (Leupold, p.185) The plan would be simple: He would come into the darkness and substitute Himself for you and me and all who lived. He would keep the Law which God required of us and give us His own righteousness. He would sacrifice Himself unto death to be the payment for sin which God required of us and give us full forgiveness for all our sins. He would rise from death to the glory of life eternal that we might share His glory and His life.

He would be "Mighty God." He would possess "the capacity for carrying out to the full all that his brilliant plans call for: He has nothing less than the full omnipotence of God at his command. What he devised, he is also well able to achieve. He is himself God." (Leupold, p.185-186) He kept the Law perfectly in thought, word, and deed. His sacrifice was sufficient for the sin of all mankind. His resurrection was the sign of God's acceptance of Jesus' work and His sacrifice.

He would be Everlasting Father. He is there to care for us, His people, like a father cares for his children. He brought us the brightness of His holiness in our baptisms. He gives us the glory of His forgiveness in His Word. He feeds us with the life-giving body and blood in Holy Communion. He protects us, provides for us, and preserves us in body and soul. He does this in any and every situation which this dark world can throw at us. And He will do it forever.

He would be the Prince of Peace. He has gathered us together as His redeemed people and rules us in peace. We live at peace with Him and with one another. We look forward to an eternal peace, freed from the darkness of sin and its consequences.

That is where our comparison of Christmas lights with the Light of the world born into this world this evening falls short. No matter how many lights are put up, there is always darkness still there. No matter how technologically advanced these displays become, they will all eventually break and be darkened.

The Light born tonight which has overcome darkness will eventually destroy darkness for good. The Light which lived, suffered, died, and rose again for you is the light in which we will live eternally. As the very last book in the Bible promises, “[Heaven] does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lampThere will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelations 21:23; 22:4)

Many of you know (especially my family) that I have been accused of being a bit of a reserved traditionalist when it comes to Christmas customs. But, when it comes, lights and decorating, I say put up lights – lots and lots of lights. We have seen a great light (and I don't mean any of the gorgeous displays on any house in this town). Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, is born this night. The darkness of sin, death, and hell has been defeated. Eternal light has been secured for you, for me, for all know Him by faith. Proclaim that good news with every word you say and with every light you display. As St. John wrote in the first chapter of his Gospel, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” And it never will! Amen.