

### **Christmas Eve 2020 The Light Shines Out!**

Luke 2:1-20, Isaiah 9:2-7

Good evening! Merry Christmas! I'm so glad that each of you have joined us this Christmas Eve. Whether your tradition is to worship on this night, or you are patiently enduring what someone else wanted to do, I don't think you are here by accident. Welcome!

Usually, I love Christmas and especially Christmas Eve. The candles, the carols, the kids running around dressed up like sheep or shepherds or kings, the nativity. A lot of times worship on Christmas Eve is kind of a nice time to relax, take a breath, and remember what all the hustle and bustle is really about.

But this year seems different, doesn't it? This year we aren't all gathered together in this beautiful sanctuary. We are wearing masks and waving at one another. One of our members was telling me last week that this year is the first Christmas out of about 90 where she isn't able to gather with her family. This year is hard. The pandemic is raging—last week we had several days where COVID killed more people in the US each day than died in 9/11 or at Pearl Harbor. Thank God for the promise of the vaccines, but right now COVID is worse than ever. And of course the pandemic isn't the only thing. We've had to cope with recession, poisonous politics, extreme weather, earthquakes, civil unrest and injustice, strained relationships, deepened isolation and loneliness—you name it, we've had it this year.

What do we do with Christmas Eve in a year like 2020? Can you even really celebrate Christmas in the middle of all this? This year seems too dark. Too hard. Too full of death and loss and hurt. But listen again to the ancient promise from the prophet Isaiah—the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. What a promise! Christmas isn't for people who have everything perfectly put together. No, Christmas is a dramatic *rescue* mission. The story of Christmas is the story of God choosing to come down into our mess, into our darkness, and make things better.

2020 is a year made for Christmas! We need the reality of Christmas now more than ever! Here at the midnight of this dark year—we all need a little light. This darkness has got to give. That is the promise of Christmas. The light is coming into the world! We can have hope because of Christmas. The light is arriving, and darkness cannot overcome it. The good news of Christmas dazzled the shepherds out in the fields as the light and glory of God shone around them. The light announced the arrival of our light in a manger.

This year isn't the only time Christmas has arrived in the middle of a dark time. Think about the soldiers in the trenches in World War I. That was one of the most violent and deadly wars ever. 15 million people died. Many who survived had to deal with life-long shell shock and other problems. As Christmas approached in 1914 the Pope suggested having a truce, but the warring nations refused. Then, on Christmas Eve, 106 years ago, some light came into the darkness. The soldiers were hunkered down in the trenches—cold, wet, hungry, miserable. Far from home, at risk of death or dismemberment at any time—the worst Christmas ever! Then they heard something. It was familiar, it was quiet but unmistakable. It was voices. Voices singing Silent Night. The Allied soldiers could hear the Germans singing! Then they joined in. One song, many languages, all about the baby Jesus arriving in a manger on a holy night. Before too long soldiers risked their lives by climbing up out of the trenches, without weapons, hands held high. Soon enemies were talking, sharing, laughing, even playing soccer! The soldiers declared their own ceasefire on the night the prince of peace arrived. Even in the depths of trench warfare, Christmas brought some light and life.

The good news of Christmas is that the light is coming into the world. We are not left alone in the cold and dark. We are not sentenced to death. No! The *true* story of the world is very different from the hopeless story that much of our culture tells. In the beginning of John's Gospel, he says that Jesus, the true light, was coming into the world. Christmas promises us light to overcome the darkness of our 2020! John says that the Word became a human being and came and lived among us. He says that in him was life and that life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it!

The Jesus arriving at Christmas is not merely a baby, he is the light of the world! He is life itself. He is God, choosing to be present with us. Because of the presence of Jesus—the light of the world—the voids of dark and cold and death are defeated.

Our God is not a vague, abstract concept. God isn't a force or a far away phantom. The Christmas story is of God being present WITH us. And present in a very personal way. The presence of Jesus changes everything, for the entire universe!

Because of Jesus, cold, dark death is not the end of the story. No! Our hope is light and life! Jesus' changes everything for us. And he brings one more presence into our dark world. Love. Love. I am not talking about just a warm feeling towards someone, or a tingling of excitement when you are around that special person. No—what I mean by love—what the Bible means by love-- is a rugged commitment for the good of others. A rugged commitment for the good of others. Love is a decision you make over and over, not an emotion you are swept away on. Love is an action word—it means choosing to put someone else before yourself.

The opposite of love—the absence of love—is not hate, it is apathy and selfishness. Apathy is an endless inward death spiral of selfishness. But love is a choice to instead direct your energy out, away from yourself. Jesus embodies that kind of self-giving love—his whole earthly life and death was a great act of love—he acted for our benefit at his cost, so that we could live in the light of love, even in the middle of our times of darkness and struggle. Because of Jesus there is hope.

But Christmas is not the end of the story. No, it is a beginning. Christmas is when Jesus—when the light, when God's particular presence—entered our world. Jesus didn't arrive as a full grown man, let alone as the embodiment of all of God's glory that we will see when he returns. Jesus started as a baby. He grew and changed and developed. I think the arrival of God's particular presence in every one of us starts like that—small and ready to grow. Our faith, our hope, our Jesus starts out small and seemingly helpless, like a baby. But that is not where God wants to leave us. Just as Jesus grew up, we are supposed to grow up too. We can grow deeper in Jesus. Every day, every year we can open ourselves again to God's action in us. We can choose to be more open to Jesus—present with us and at work in our lives. We can let

more light, more life, more love flow through our lives. We can become sources of light and love and life to the people around us. That is what God made us to be—people who reflected God’s loving presence and care out into our dark world.

This Christmas, I hope you will welcome the particular presence of Jesus—maybe in ways you never have before. Maybe you’ve always held him at a distance. Maybe you think he is angry with you. Maybe you believe he is disappointed in you. Friends—that isn’t true! Jesus is crazy about you! You are why he came. God’s presence became the specific, particular Jesus so he can connect with you and with me. So he can bring you life and light and love that lasts and that doesn’t disappoint. So, if you have never opened yourself to the possibility of Jesus’ presence in you—in invite you to pray along with that great carol O Little Town of Bethlehem: "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray.

Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels, The great glad tidings tell.

Oh come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!"

Amen! Jesus is waiting. His arms are open wide to you. You are deeply loved. Right now, in this very dark year, step out of the dark and into the light.

Whether you invited him in for the first time today or long ago—the next step is growing with Jesus. Don’t miss out on that! It is the way to the full, joyfilled, meaningful life you were meant to have. We have some resources and suggestions posted on our website—look for a page called Growing with Jesus. Or feel free to reach out to me or to Pastor Chris to talk about what God is up to in your life.

This year, in this dark time, I am particularly grateful for Christmas. The light of life, the embodiment of love, has come into our world. Into our lives. Nothing has to be the same again.

Let’s pray: Lord Jesus—we are amazed. We are stunned by your arrival. By your choice to give honor to a body like ours when you came and lived among us. Amazed at your self-giving love for us. Ashamed at how easy it is for us to ignore your presence with us. Lord this Christmas especially we need you. We need your light in our darkness. We need your love to overcome our pride and selfishness. We need your life to give us new energy and purpose as

we reach out in love to those you have put around us. Lord Jesus we welcome you anew into our hearts tonight, and we pray that your particular presence will grow in us all year long.

In your strong name we ask it, Amen!