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**Title:** Let There Be Light

**Date:** December 24, 2017

**Preaching:** Senior Minister Randy Spleth

**Scripture:** [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

**Text:** [Luke 2:1-20](#)

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Here we are on Christmas Eve. I can't tell you how good it is to be with you on this night and how honored we are that you chose to spend your Christmas Eve here. It's always a joy to see your faces, some new, some familiar, all gathered with such anticipation to remember something familiar and discover something new. It is just

great, and I love this night just about as much as anything I do as a pastor. Whatever level of believing you bring tonight, whatever faith tradition, you are welcome here tonight. I'm grateful that together we will consider an obscure event in a remote place that happened over 2000 years ago.

It is really amazing isn't it? Jesus was born to an impoverished couple in a tiny village on the other side of the world. He never wrote a book. He never held public office. He didn't even have a home. His network of friends was tiny and at best he only traveled about 80 miles. He was put to death as a common criminal and the executing government didn't bother to record it in their history. Yet here we are. Nearly one third of the world's population will worship his name tonight and three-fourths of the population will acknowledge his birthday tomorrow.

Shortly before his death, Lutheran pastor and Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote a book, *Jesus Through the Centuries*. Pelikan writes: "Jesus of Nazareth has been the most dominant figure in 20 centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull out of that history every trace of His name, how much would be left?"<sup>1</sup> The answer is clearly, not much. Take away all of the hospitals and colleges and universities founded and influenced by his name. Take away cities in the world that are inspired by Christian names. Take away the way we divide the history of time. No more B.C. or A.D. Even other world's religions would feel the pull of the magnet. Muslims recognize Jesus as a great prophet who preceded Mohammed. Vendanta Hindus revere Jesus as one of their "great Yogin" Some even celebrate his birth tonight, just like we celebrate.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible to overstate the impact Jesus has on this earth. There is no greater name, no one of greater influence than Jesus. That's Jesus place in the world. If Time magazine were to award a person of the centuries rather than the person of the year which it did last week, on the front cover would be the picture of the child who we meet tonight in a manger. How can this happen? It happened because of the dark.

Christmas begins in the dark. I'm not talking about turning down the lights in the sanctuary in order to create ambiance. I'm talking about the way God's story begins. You aren't in the dark about this. Everyone knows this. I'll prove it to you. What are the first three words of the Bible? Say them. "In the beginning." You see. In the beginning it was dark. The earth was formless, empty and "darkness was over the surface of the deep..." (Genesis 1:2a) Into this darkness, the Spirit of God comes and hovering over the deep, God shatters darkness with four words. You know them as too. Say them with me. "Let there be light." "God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good." (Genesis 1: 4)

The first gift of creation was the gift of the light. God created us to live in light, to experience the brilliance of His love. But before the dew on the first days of creation had barely dried, our ancestors found themselves pulled back into the darkness. Sin was born, the Garden left behind and since then we've dwelled in the land of death.

Isaiah describes it this way: The people walked in darkness...they dwelt in the shadow of death. (Isaiah 9:2a,c) John says, "...people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19)

Can you imagine the anguish that God experienced when watching us stumble around in the darkness rather than embrace the light, to live in the land of death rather than embrace the promise of life? God watched and waited, anticipating that moment when it was the time to set right what is wrong with this world and with you and me. Then the Bible puts it like this, "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son." (Galatians 4:4) That's what Christmas is; when God once again shatters the darkness of the world with the gift of Jesus says once more, "Let there be light."

John the Baptist understood this. When he points to Jesus, he says he will "...give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." (Luke 1: 78b) When Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple for his blessing, Simeon says Jesus is "...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:32) It's not surprising that Jesus said: "I am

the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

That's ahead of the story. On this night, God uses light to send the Light of the World. You know how the story goes. Shepherds were in the fields, "... keeping watch over their flock by night." (Luke 2:8b) They were in the dark with nothing but the stars in the heaven. Then, like a spot light suddenly turned on a dark stage, suddenly there is a single brilliant light when "...an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." (Luke 2:9) The angel announces the Good News that the light has come into the world, not the angelic spotlight shining around them, but the Light of the World lying in a manger. But God decides that the brilliant spotlight wasn't enough to get their attention so, God lights up the sky with an army of angels, shining their light on the shepherds, "...praising God and saying 'Glory to God in the highest heaven.'" (Luke 2:13c) No wonder they left the darkness of the hillside and headed to see the Light in Bethlehem.

The light show isn't over. God uses another brilliant light, a star which rises in the east. Wise men follow it, knowing that a light shining in darkness is a sign. They ask in Jerusalem, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star...." (Matthew 2: 2a) God uses light to point to the Light of the World, to direct attention to the birth of Savior. John points to the Light of the World. Joseph and Mary rear the Light of the World. The shepherds and magi see the light and then, visit the Light of the World in his manger.

There is a lot of light going on at Christmas but Christmas didn't just start in the dark, it is about the dark. Let me ask you a personal question. How many of you like the dark? I'm not talking about a dark, candlelight dinner. A friend who just celebrated 50 years of marriage told me that he and his wife are having more candlelight dinners. "That's wonderful; still romantic after all these years." "No," he said. "We look better in candlelight. The dark hides all our flaws and imperfections."

That's not the darkness I'm asking about all although this darkness does have to do with flaws and imperfections, the imperfections of bad decisions, arrogant attitudes, greed, selfish, behavior....oh let's just call it what it is, sin. Is there anyone who has found themselves in the darkness of sin? Has anybody sinned recently?

I know that sin is a risky subject on Christmas Eve but let's do something different tonight. Let's do a mass confession. It's good for the soul. I've done it with you before so I know you can do it, so I guess it isn't all that

risky. Some of you are season veterans at mass confession. You simply need to be honest now. You're in church and you aren't going to see many of these people for a long time, so what do you care what they think? If anybody has sinned at least once this last year...fudged a little on the truth, got a little greedy, acted selfish, arrogant or proud. If you have sinned at least at once this year or if you think you were pretty clean but the person next to you went south a lot and you want to help him out, just hold your hand up real high. Keep it up there for a minute, would you? Just take a look around the room. This is a depraved group of people we've got in worship tonight.<sup>3</sup>

If your answer is "Yes, sometimes I like the dark", then the good news is, God sent Jesus so that those who walk in darkness can see a great light. Christmas is about stepping out of the darkness and experiencing light.

This is where it gets personal. I know that there is probably nothing as personal as having to raise your hand and admitting you are a sinner but in a way, that was pretty easy, wasn't it? There isn't one of us who hasn't had a moment or two this past week if not today when we've said, "Why did I do that, or why did I say that, or I wish I could take that back." We do stumble around in the darkness, all of us.

Raising your hand in group may be personal because you acknowledged your sin, but the truly personal part is, how do you deal with it? How are you going to deal with your sin? I hope you are going to deal with it by saying yes to the Light of the Word because Jesus didn't come so to be the most dominate figure in 20 centuries. Jesus came to save the world. Jesus was sent to address what's wrong with us, address what separates you and me from God, to bring light to the darkness of the world.

For that to happen, there has to be a response, not by a show of hands but with a yes or no. It's worked this way from the very beginning. God comes to a young woman and says, "Mary, I want you to be a part of my story. Yes or no?" She says yes. God goes to Joseph and says "Joseph, you can be a part of my story, but there will be a cost...yes or no?" He says yes. God goes to a king named Herod. "Herod, you can bow down. You can serve a greater king. Yes or no?" Herod says, "No." He comes to the shepherds....

You see how this works. There is an invitation to each of us, to step out of the darkness and into the light. This is the most important part of your Christmas right here. It is not the food, not the parties, not the people, not the music, not the really cool gifts. It is this right here, in the midst of this familiar story. Is there a yes or no in you?

For some, your yes or no question is about commitment. Saying yes means that you make a commitment to the first time to really understand who Jesus is, to take Jesus off the back burner and get serious about your spiritual life. Some of you need that say yes to a deeper relationship, to real commitment, to something more than just going through the paces.

For others, saying yes means that you are going to take Jesus as your Savior. You've been putting it off, resisting Jesus' gift of salvation for one reason or another, for a long time even though you really want to God's forgiveness and love in your life. I can't think of a better time to say yes to God.

Many said yes to this baby some time ago, but God can always do a new thing in your life. Maybe your yes tonight is a yes to God teaching you something new, moving you beyond the familiar ways of faith and helping you grow in service or giving or witness. Maybe your yes is simply, God, I'm open to a new place in your kingdom.

You can see why I'm so happy you are here tonight because in the midst of the very familiar story is the always the possibility that something new that can happen for you. Everybody has that opportunity but you have to be willing to say yes to a baby in Bethlehem, yes to a swaddled Savior, yes the Light of the World. Can you do that? Will you do that tonight?

I hope so and I'm praying so because this isn't about the person of the centuries, it is about the person of eternity, our Savior and our Lord. Jesus is not only the Light of the World. He is the Resurrection and the Life, because "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him and this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world..."

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus through the centuries: his place in the history of culture By Jaroslav Pelikán, page 1.

<sup>2</sup> American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon, Stephen Prothero

<sup>3</sup> This exercise is from J. Ortberg in "Where Heaven Meets Earth", 12/24/2008, Menlo Park. The entire sermon and ending influence this sermon.