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Title: Receive the Light

Date: December 24, 2018

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Isaiah 9:2, 6-7](#)

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

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I have three stories for you tonight, one is old, one older and one is new. They are all about the light that shines in the darkness and a longing within each us.

The first story is old. It was shared recently with me by a friend. I don't know if it is true but it is filled with

truth and starts us off in the right direction. It comes from a very dark time in the history of our country, the rebellion of the south which we call the Civil War. During the winter of 1864, the Confederate army of Robert E. Lee faced the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant at Petersburg, Virginia. The war was now three and a half years old and the glorious charge had long since given way to unimaginable death, darkness, and destruction. Late one evening one of Lee's generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Up and down the line the rebel forces of the South began building huge bonfires in celebration of the event. These fires did not go unnoticed in the Union camps and soon a nervous Grant sent out a reconnaissance patrol to see what Johnny Reb was up to. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had a son and these were celebration fires. It so happened that Grant and Pickett had been contemporaries at West Point and knew one another well. Instead of taking advantage of the fire, Grant too honored the occasion and ordered that bonfires should be built. For miles on both sides of the battle line, light shattered darkness as these fires burned. No shots fired. No war fought a temporary peace. Many lives were saved because of the light celebrating the birth of a child. ¹

You see how it points us in the right direction, to the older story that is familiar and well-worn. It also takes place in a dark time. The darkness wasn't a war although God's people were beaten and defeated. There was the darkness of disillusionment and oppression. And into this old familiar story comes even more darkness because the census, a universal taxation caused an even greater burden. They were walking in a land of darkness.

What happens when you walk in the land of darkness? You can answer that question. There is not a person here tonight that can't answer it. We've all had experiences of darkness, whether it be personal loss or death or illness or loneliness, sadness or disillusionment. Some experience that tonight and come to worship with heavy hearts. Perhaps even closer to the heart, we all have experienced the darkness that comes with rebellion, times when we intentionally sought the dark, did things that we knew were not right, not healthy, knew were sinful. I don't have to tell any of you about this darkness because in one form or another, at one time or another, it has touched the life of each person here. In those times, when darkness surrounds you if you could receive anything, what would it be? Light? A Savior? Both are found in the oldest story.

The shepherds were just minding their business, watching over their flock by night. And suddenly, "...an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." (Luke 2:11) Shepherds. Why shepherds? You know about shepherds. They were poor. They weren't seen as trustworthy or honest. They weren't ambitious; they were lazy. They were unclean, both physically and spiritually. And they smelled like sheep which is a problem. When they came home, people didn't get excited and say, "Oh good, the shepherds are home. We are waiting for you." They may look good in the children's pageant or in your nativity at home, but they were rebellious outcasts, living in the dark. What was God thinking to appear to a bunch of rebels?

It was as big a surprise to them as it is to us. Sometimes, I think about the shepherds sitting by a small fire out in the Judean hills a few miles outside of Bethlehem. I wonder what they were wishing for, what they wanted. Probably more wood for the fire. There wasn't a lot of available wood in Palestine. Maybe a thicker robe to keep them warm. No predators to fight, no lions, or bears or wolves. I'm sure one or two wished for this. Someone to volunteer for the night shift. They might have all wished for that. "I hope I don't have to stay up and hear those stupid sheep baas all night long." But I am confident, sitting out there in the dark, not one of those rebellious outcasts said, "You know, guys, what I really want and need? I could really use a Savior tonight."²

I don't think I'm being judgmental. I know a thing or two about people and I know, for the most part, people never really think they need a Savior. We go through life feeling pretty self-sufficient. But eventually, we discover that we aren't as smart as we think we are, that making all of the decisions and calling all of the shots doesn't always have the outcome we want. What happens to most people is this. You discover that there are times when you

end up hurting the things and people you care about most. You do dumb things, say the wrong thing, and sometimes, maybe even many times, rebel against the very things, the very values or the very people who you love the most. All of us do it sometime, some of us do it much of the time. We stumble and fall and think, I wish I hadn't done that, said that, and been that. And yet, does it cause us to say, "I need a Savior?" No. When is it that people get humble enough to actually say, "I need a Savior?" Almost never. It's usually when you are about to lose something that you love, when you are in trouble so deep that you think, "If God doesn't do something, I'm going to lose everything." Most of the rest of the time, what do you say? "I'm good. I'm okay."

So I'm pretty sure that those shepherds were like us and not one of them said, "Guys, I've been thinking about this and what I really, really need tonight is a Savior." But that was what they got. The angel said, "Hey fellows. God has chosen you to be the first to receive the light. You don't know you need one, but God sent you a Savior and he "...is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-11) Then, to make sure that they received the Good News, they received the light of Christ, a whole army of angels show up and floods the foothills like a super bowl halftime show.

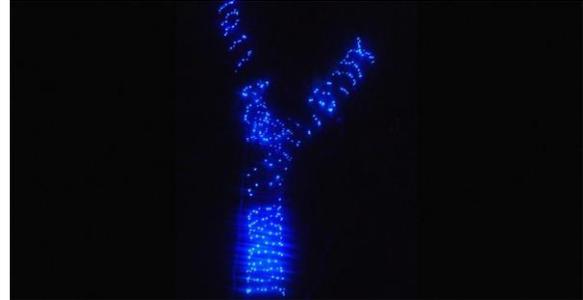
You know what happens. One turns to the other says, "We better go home to Bethlehem. We didn't know that we needed one but we've got a Savior waiting for us." "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger... glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." (Luke 2:16, 20c) Rebellious, smelly shepherds found a Savior waiting for them in Bethlehem.

That is the oldest story which is familiar to you. I wonder if you know the new one. It too is about Christmas light even though it is just four years old. It comes from the place where there have been rebels living in the darkness of the jungle. For fifty years, Columbia experienced a civil war between the F.A.R.C rebels and the Columbia military forces. It began slowly in the 1960s but within a couple of decades, the rebels became the largest standing guerilla force in the world. The F.A.R.C guerillas financed their rebellion through extortion, kidnapping, and trading drugs. Because they existed for over five decades, most of the guerrillas only knew a rebellious life, nothing else.³

In 2010, Columbia's President Juan Manuel Santos began to seek peace. He had a political strategy, a legal strategy, a military strategy but he needed a communications strategy. So he hired a man named Jose Miguel Sokoloff. To

his surprise, Sokoloff knew exactly what the rebels needed; they needed to receive the light of Christmas.⁴

It started with the recognition that within the heart of every rebel, there is a desire to come out of the darkness and into the light. They knew it was the case because every year at Christmas, rebels would sneak home, spend time with their families and then go back to the darkness of the jungle. So they designed a campaign around Christmas light. They covered nine 75 foot trees located on strategic paths in the jungle with Christmas lights. Then, they wired them to motion detectors and when the rebels walked by at night, the trees would light up. Beside the tree was a sign that read, "If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilize. At Christmas, everything is possible." 331 rebels came home. Not many, but a start.



Those rebels who came home told Sokoloff something. They said, "The Christmas trees were really, really cool but you know, we don't walk anymore. We use rivers. It's our highway. If you really want to send a message, use the river. So they came up with an idea to you share the light of Christmas by using luminous floating balls. They went to the market and bought Christmas trinkets and toys that they would have gotten as children. Volunteers wrote handwritten notes and filled 70,000 balls with these trinkets, toys, and messages. Some even took off their cross jewelry and put them in the ball. Then they dropped these luminous Christmas balls into the river, floating them down at night so they could be picked up. It was so



beautiful that it literally drew people to them. They couldn't help but pick up a ball and when they opened it up, there was a message. "Come home. At Christmas, everything is possible." Because of this display of Christmas light, more rebels realized that living a rebellious life was wrong and demobilized. But not all of them.

So the next Christmas, they made it even more personal. They found 27 mothers of rebel fighters and asked them for pictures of their sons and daughter when they were young children, so young that nobody would recognize them as adults but old enough that the rebels could say to their

friends, that's me. They blew pictures up and underneath it put this caption. "Before you were a rebel, you were my child. Come back this Christmas. I'm waiting for you."

Wow. Do you think it was effective? Would you respond to that, if you were a rebel? Well, it was effective and it helped bring peace to Columbia and earn Santos the Nobel Peace prize of 2016. But of course the question tonight isn't about Columbia rebels but about you. It is fact, it is the message of every Christmas. So let me ask it again and this time, make it personal, make it God's statement to you. Hear it now, just for you.



Before you were a rebel, you were my child. Come back at Christmas. I'm waiting for you. God understands and recognizes that within every life, there is a desire to come out of the rebellious darkness into His light. We expect to be left alone in our rebellion. We're not sure we need a Savior and it might not even be what we are hoping for tonight. But we've got a Savior and an invitation and it comes in the form of a child.

God sent a message. It shatters the night like a bonfire between two armies, fighting for control of your life. It comes to you in your darkness, even if you aren't sure you really need or want a Savior. It comes into your life and offers an invitation to come home.

You know, that can happen tonight. You can come home and receive the light because, at Christmas, everything is possible. I hope and pray that it happens for you right now. I hope and pray you discover that His light is bigger than any darkness that holds you, that His love is greater than any rebellion that haunts you, and that the home He offers and that awaits you is not just the peace of Christmas but the everlasting home of eternal life.

"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 to say, "Before you were a rebel, you were my child. Come home. I'm waiting." Stand, sing, and acknowledge that invitation by sharing the light of Christ.

¹ This story is originally attributed to Harry Emerson Fosdick. I retrieved it by subscription at sermons.com, used by Brett Blair. Civil war scholars indicate that Pickett's son was actually born in the summer. Whether or not bonfires celebrated is not known.

² Berlin, Tom. Chasing Light. 12/24/16. <https://www.florisumc.org>.

³ Berlin uses this story too but in a less dramatic fashion.

⁴https://www.ted.com/talks/jose_miguel_sokoloff_how_christmas_lights_helped_guerrillas_put_down_their_guns/transcript?language=en#t-637109