

December 24, 2016 (Christmas Eve)

TEXT: Luke 2:1–14

TITLE: Starshades & God's Light

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

We're told in the bible that the angel came to Mary and quietly informed her that she would give birth to a son, a child of the Most High God. But what if that angel's visit had occurred in a much more public way? What if Gabriel had appeared to Mary while she was surrounded by family and friends, maybe at a town festival or public event? And why did the angels bring their news of great joy to solitary shepherds, watching their flocks by night outside the city limits? Why didn't the angel chorus light up the whole sky over the center of Bethlehem, letting everyone know about the birth of Christ the King? How come we read about three wise men traveling from afar and kneeling humbly at the manger, when we could have been told about magi traveling with a huge entourage, issuing press releases every step of the way as they brought their gifts to the baby Jesus? Why is everything about the Christmas story so subdued and private and understated? Why wasn't there a bigger show for the birth of the Son of God, this long-awaited Savior?

There's a philosophical and a pragmatic answer to these questions. As Shakespeare philosophically said in *The Merchant of Venice*, "all that glitters is not gold." In effect, he reminds us that the brightest thing is not always the best; the loudest voice seldom says what needs to be heard; and the most widely-shared tweet, no matter how famous the tweeter, rarely contains any true wisdom. Ultimately, the way the Christmas drama unfolded was the way it was meant to be. It involved a quiet, personal declaration of faith from a young woman, who said, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" It gave preference to humble shepherds as the first ones to tell of a Savior's birth, just as it focused on the magi only long enough so that our eyes would shift from their robes and golden gifts to the humble, unadorned face of the Christ child lying in the manger. There is true wisdom in the way that God's understated light shone in the darkness long ago on that first Christmas day.

There's another, more pragmatic way to think about this, and it comes to us, not from the plays of Shakespeare but from the journals of modern science. Imagine if you were an alien living on a planet in a distant galaxy in outer space. One day you point your powerful telescope toward our solar system. You might see Jupiter, our largest planet, but you won't see the planet Earth. Why? Because our sun is so bright that from your far-away vantage point, the Earth would be impossible to see because of the sun's glare. It's like when you're driving west at sunset and the sun's direct light blinds you. You put on sunglasses and flip down the visor and suddenly things come into view again. By blocking the sun's direct light, suddenly lots of things become visible again.

Astronomers now know that there are millions and millions of planets outside our solar system, most of which we can't see or learn anything about because they are small, and the stars or suns around which they orbit blind us by their own light. This is why NASA is hoping to secure funding for sending a star-shade into outer space. A starshade is shaped like a giant sunflower. It can be launched into space in a giant, metallic tube. But when it opens up, it has a large, round center and smaller metallic petals all around it; and it can be positioned in front of space telescopes in such a way that it acts like your car visor does in blocking the setting sun. It covers up the bright lights of distant suns so that the lesser lights of small planets far out in the universe can now be seen. It's a simple yet brilliant idea: By blocking the larger light suddenly entire worlds become clearly visible.

The point is this: There is much that demands our attention every day. There are the immediate needs close at home—of family, paying our bills, providing food and shelter for ourselves and those around us. There are the compelling issues right here in Pennsylvania and all around the world—keeping our jobs, staying safe on the streets, worrying about politics, pollution, terrorism, climate change, and what the future holds for us. Yes, there are also times of beauty and joy—loving gatherings over the holidays, the relief of getting good news from a doctor, the comfort of being together as a family of faith. But so often the bright lights of the “big things” glaring at us from the headlines and social media blind us to the lesser-yet-still-important lights close by.

We too could use a spiritual “starshade”—something that will block out the big lights for a moment so that we can see things that as just as important, if not more important, right near at hand. And in a real way, the story of Christmas is precisely that type of “starshade.” Think about it. God came to Mary, not in a public place where people in the crowd will argue over what the angel said or feel angry that God chose this young girl instead of them; rather God came to Mary privately so that a single, solitary maiden could shine her own soft light in the world, embodying a few simple words of faith: *“Here am I; let it be with me according to your word.”* God sent angels to announce the birth of Christ, not in a celestial display of overwhelming pyrotechnics over Bethlehem, but through the dim-yet-undeniable enthusiasm radiating from the faces of a few poor shepherds—people who've never been in the spotlight, but whose hearts were ready to proclaim the good news an entire world longed to hear. And the wise men needed neither paparazzi nor narcissistic press releases, because in a single act of humility—kneeling before a child in a dimly lit manger scene – all that needed to be said was right there, clear as day, bright as the morning star against a night sky.

2016 is slowly drawing to a close. It has been a tumultuous year of joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, of blinding, unrelenting news reports and global crises demanding our attention and action. It all feels like too much—like we're helpless in the glare and unable to find a way forward. Which is why Christmas is as Christmas is. The story of this night may seem mixed-up and surprising, even

counter-intuitive. But there is wisdom in the way God's understated story of hope and light and eternal salvation is revealed on Christmas Day.

May we shade our eyes from the garish and the overwhelming—and notice a child close at hand, a family in need nearby, a concrete good deed that deserves to be done, and discover the peace that comes from being faithful in little things each day—for God chose to come as a child, so that we would focus on what's most important. God chose to come at night, so we would see what needs to be seen. God chose to come to shepherds lest we ever dismiss anyone on life's margins. God chose to have magi kneel down lest we ever believe worldly power has all the answers. And God chose to come to us—to appear close at hand—dimly seen yet celebrated with candlelight on Christmas Eve, so that we might see and believe what's eternally true: unto us a child has been born, who is Christ the Lord. All else is just glitter.

AMEN