

## December 24, 2020 | Christmas Eve Candlelight service

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

TITLE: **From Darkness to Light**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Let's face it—the past months have not been easy. Long ago the prophet Isaiah spoke about “the people who walked in darkness.” Those words seem like an appropriate metaphor for us today. When you walk in darkness, you're not sure where you're going; you stumble, you lose track of time, you wish it would just be over – that there would soon be some light on the horizon. Sure, we've tried to make the best of things. We've stayed home as much as possible. We've learned a lot about restaurants that deliver and curbside grocery services. We've stocked up on paper goods; we've bought personalized masks; we've even chuckled at holiday gag gifts like Covid-themed Christmas ornaments and Dr. Fauci bobblehead dolls.

But still, it's been a dark season with little to amuse us. When's the last time you hugged a friend, wandered aimlessly shopping in a store, sat in a movie theater or concert hall? We have Zoom calls now instead of family reunions. We gather around screens in place of being together for weddings, funerals, or even church. Anxiety and depression are up; jobs, savings, and income are down. School has been disrupted. Work has been disrupted. Life has been disrupted—as if someone flicked off the lights and simply walked away from the switch nine months ago. We are a people who've walked in darkness.

Which is why it is worth pointing out that much of the Christmas story took place when it was dark outside. I say that not to suggest that darkness is OK and nothing to worry about, but rather to note that disruptions and darkness inevitably happen. And sometimes it is in those very moments that we see God's plans and power the clearest.

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* To be registered meant to be enrolled, literally counted and put on the Roman tax rolls so your wealth can support a government that oppressed you. It was not optional. It was not voluntary. And to honor this decree meant that Joseph and his very pregnant young wife had to travel from their home in Nazareth to a place that only had historical meaning for them—the city of Bethlehem far to the south, the ancestral home of Joseph's family. We don't know if they'd ever been there before. We do know that the city was overfull because of the census. And the best Joseph and Mary could do was find a stable to bed down for the night as evening fell. Darkness and disruption.

*In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.* Cows and horses graze without eating the grass down to its roots because they draw in the vegetation with their tongues and then tear it off with their lower teeth. But sheep have cleft upper lips that let them nibble the grass down to the soil. So although they eat less than cattle, they need to constantly find fresh pasture, which means shepherds don't spend much time at home. They are the original social distancers, which suited most people fine, since they were definitely not part of society's elite.

Shepherds watching their flocks by night—darkness, distancing, and (once the angels arrived) disruption.

*In the time of King Herod, magi from the East come to Jerusalem, asking “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.”* Foreign emissaries used to visit neighboring countries bringing gifts and tribute to new kings. In this case, the visitors were also astrologers, reading signs in heaven for news on earth. But the message they shared filled the land with turmoil. It frightened King Herod to his core; so much so that he would lie to the Magi to find out more about this “infant King” and eventually order the death of scores of male babies in the land of Judea. And when did these magi travel? Mostly at night, in the dark, following a star. Darkness, death and disruption.

Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the magi—like us they walked in darkness. But they were not destined to be defined by the darkness—and neither are we. In the words of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. Darkness is something we push back against. We let our pupils widen and we accustom our eyes to the darkness so that we can still make out shapes amid the shadows and find a way forward even when it’s difficult. Thankfully we have not let the darkness of the past months defeat us. If you can hear my voice, you have not withdrawn into the shadows but have chosen to stay connected—to be part of the body of Christ worshiping and praying for a hurting world. You have seen the nobility of spirit residing in those around us who serve the common good in thankless jobs—who stock shelves, clean hospital floors, teach in schools, parent full-time and work full-time from the same kitchen tables. Despite this year’s isolation, after the death of George Floyd we broke the silence to cry out that Black Lives Matter and flooded the streets in protest. Despite our political cynicism, we voted in numbers not seen in over 120 years. Despite prejudices that would despise the stranger and the migrant, the global pandemic has shown us that borders are human chalk lines pretending to be walls—for if one person, one child anywhere, is at risk, all our lives are touched. That is why we have not gone quietly into that good night. By God’s grace, we know this world holds more than darkness and disruption.

Another poem by Dylan Thomas is titled, “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines.” I love that image. Too often we imagine the Christmas light is something that breaks in like a dramatic beam from heaven, a celestial spotlight blinding us in all its glory. But think about the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph’s eyes had to adjust to the darkness around them as they searched out a stable that would soon hold the Christ child. Once the angels left them, the shepherds had to navigate the fields in the dark to find the Bethlehem nativity scene on their own. And the magi did all their work at night, trusting solely in the distant beams from a wandering star everyone else scarcely noticed.

Light breaks where no sun shines—even the Christmas light—because God is at work within you, beside you in the darkness, in every tough time. That is why Isaiah said, to the people who walked in darkness a light has broken in. It has dawned somewhere

behind our eyes, within our hearts, deep in our souls. And this light gently illuminates the outline of a child for all to see. Imagine that!

The prophet Isaiah describes this light, this Christ child, with a string of nouns and a couple adjectives. In Christ we see the embodiment of Wonderful—Joy incarnate. We see a Counselor, Wisdom incarnate. We see a Mighty God—creation and power combined. We see an Everlasting Parent—timeless and self-giving Love. And we see one who is the Giver of Peace, whose authority, whose light will grow continually. It will build upon justice and righteousness. It shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Too often overly exuberant preachers try to convince you that Christmas is about spotlights of glory, blinding us like deer caught in God's high-beams. Too often revival pulpiteers insist that Christ's light is holy and unique while our difficult lives are called unholy, dark and unworthy. Yet evangelical shouting for us to step into the light gives no comfort when we have no choice but to walk in darkness. The real message of Christmas is that God came into our darkness, into our Covid-anxious, weary and shadowy world, to be born as a child—born in a humble stable precisely designed to allow our night-accustomed eyes to clearly see him. And as we focus on him, a soft, gentle light reflects back to us—and like Isaiah we call it Wonderful, counseling Wisdom, Creator God, timeless parental Love, a Peace that passes all understanding.

You have company in this dark season. Look around: shepherds, magi, Mary and Joseph. For unto us a child is born, a babe is given to us. We are never alone—and in Christ, by Christ, through Christ, the darkness will pass away.

AMEN