

“On Them a Light Has Shined”

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20

There’s an old story about a grandmother struggling with a life-threatening illness. She had her young granddaughter visiting with her one Christmas. The granddaughter was watching her as she lit a candle and placed it in the window. “Grandma,” the little girl asked, “why do we light candles on Christmas?”

“We light candles on Christmas, my dear, to tell the darkness we beg to differ.”

That’s why we come out on Christmas Eve, isn’t it? We’re eager to end this service in the dark, holding candles in our hands and softly singing the words of “Silent Night.” We all have a desire, deep within us, to tell the darkness, “We beg to differ.”

We don’t have to look very far to find darkness on Christmas Eve, or any other night. Somewhere, even in the most affluent community, a child will go to bed hungry. Somewhere another child will cry himself to sleep, because Christmas Eve is one of those times one parent drinks too much and the other parent pays the price.

The county jail will be especially dark after “lights out” ... no candles there. And not far away from those barred windows, someone will be cruising the streets in a car without headlights, looking for a shadowy figure selling tiny plastic envelopes of white powder.

Darkness never sleeps. It’s always open for business. Darkness entices its victims with whispers of illicit pleasure, then springs the trap. Darkness has swallowed up far too many lives and devoured them whole.

Our feeble candle flames make no impression on that darkness. Candles don’t shed a lot of light, really — just think back to your last power failure at home. Maybe you had to go

rummaging around in the kitchen drawer until you found that old candle stub and struck the match. Then you breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe you even sat there and stared at the glowing flame for a moment or two, just to reassure yourself: *Sorry, darkness, you won't get me tonight.*

In a power failure, you discover just how many candles or flashlights you need to make up for one darkened light bulb, and that's just indoors. Carry your candle outside at night and hold it up to the starry heavens. You'll discover how utterly insignificant that light seems, how effectively it's swallowed up by darkness.

Yet, we still feel compelled to do it. Still, we light the candles. Why?

The answer to why we do it is found in the book of Isaiah:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined (9:2).*

We come to the sanctuary on Christmas Eve not because it's well-lighted, and not because we physically need the illumination of the candles we hold. We come because something inside us calls us to that place.

Maybe you can't put a name to it, this power that calls you. Maybe you're not even sure if you believe in it — but you feel better, somehow, when you're in a roomful of others, holding candles high and singing familiar carols. Call it sentimentality if you want, call it romanticism, call it celebrating the culture — something about this season of Christmas speaks even to the most cynical of hearts, something that can bring even the hardest of hard-core doubters and the

most self-absorbed of self-convinced skeptics to the edge, to the border — the very demilitarized zone — between doubt and faith.

Something rises within our souls and warms to the glow of the Christmas candles. The rational mind can't explain it. The power that calls us to the sanctuary is not a light of our own creation. It's not jolly "Christmas cheer," nor human good will, nor hope, nor accomplishment. As we raise our candle to receive light from a neighbor, we acknowledge that we are *already* in darkness — that we possess not, within ourselves, the power to push back the gloom of human or natural evil. We light the candles in hope that light will come to us, unbidden, from beyond ourselves.

It's a most particular kind of light, not a finite source. It's quite unlike the flickering candles that will burn out and die once their wax is consumed, their wicks burnt down to nothing. This is the distinctive light of which the Nicene Creed speaks:

*God of God, light of light,
Very God of Very God;
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made,
who for us ... and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit
of the Virgin Mary ...*

The greatest wonder of it all is this: that same light took on human form and was laid down on the prickly straw of a Bethlehem manger. It cried, it slept, and it ate. In time, it played and learned. It fought and loved, taught and healed — and, gently and lovingly, led others to a vastly greater light.

Then came the day when that “God from God, light from light, Very God from Very God,” stumbled to Calvary and allowed his light to be extinguished. His enemies sealed him inside a dark tomb. Three days later, he burst forth, in a blaze of heaven-sent glory that has not been extinguished since — no, not ever. “The light shines in the darkness,” as John puts it in the prologue to his Gospel, “and the darkness did not overcome it.”

There’s a famous parable of a church — one version says it was in Switzerland — that lost its historic building to a tragic fire. After grieving for a time, the congregation moved on to construct a new sanctuary.

There was an architect in the congregation. He asked for the privilege of designing the church himself. He told them he would demand no fee, but that he must have absolute freedom to design the building as he saw fit. Knowing him to be a fine architect, the people agreed.

The entire community looked on with growing curiosity as the building went up. They were eager to see what sort of sanctuary would emerge from the construction site littered with lumber and stone.

What they saw, eventually, was very pleasing indeed. Some called it a masterpiece of simplicity and elegance. The materials were all natural and were displayed to their best advantage. The room was airy and open, the doorway inviting. A place was even found to display some of the old stained glass, salvaged from the former building.

It was when the church was nearly completed that one of the children looked up and noticed something that seemed to be missing. “Where are the lights?” she asked.

Sure enough, there was not a single light in the sanctuary — and nothing to indicate where any could be installed. Members began talking to one another — you know how churches are — and in no time at all the church board had gathered right there in the half-completed sanctuary.

They summoned the architect. When he walked in, they besieged him with questions. Surely, he’d made a terrible mistake, they chided. He’d left the lights out of the blueprints!

“There’s been no mistake,” he replied. “Trust me. Wait and see.”

The night of dedication for the new building finally came, and it happened to be Christmas Eve. As the members walked through the doors, each one was handed a small oil-lamp of gleaming brass. The architect had specially designed those lamps to match the design of the building. As one worshiper after another walked into the darkened sanctuary, the room was bathed in a beautiful glow, as light and shadow played upon the ceiling.

The pastor asked the architect to come forward and speak. He explained to the people that the lamps were his gift to the church. They were theirs to keep. He urged them to bring their lamps with them whenever they came to worship.

“You are the light of the world,” he continued. “If you are not present in worship, there will be a dark corner in need of light. When worship is ended, take your light home with you. Allow it to shine in your homes and in your lives, a reminder of the presence of Christ, to whose glory this building is dedicated.”

When the Christmas Eve service was ended, and the company of worshipers wended their way back down the hill, lamps in hand, it was, they say, as though a river of light were flowing from that church back into the community. *Those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light had shined.*

On Christmas Eve, we hold candles in our hands. It may last only a few brief moments, long enough to sing a carol or two. We'll sing that beloved music, feel the warm embrace of Christian community, and celebrate the presence of the Christ child in our midst. Then, we will leave this place to go home, or to the home of others we may be visiting.

But *how* will we journey? Will we leave this place the same as when we entered? Will we step out into that dark night unaffected — untouched — by the vision of Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger?

He expects more of us than that, this Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem. “You are the light of the world,” he once told his disciples. “A city built on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14). The lights we hold in our hands are not simply for our own personal illumination. Just as we will pass the light from one candle to another, the light of this Christian faith of ours *is for sharing*.

Did you ever notice that, when you light someone else's candle, your own light is not diminished? The most important things in life — faith, hope and love — are like that. Sometimes we fear losing them, so we try to keep them to ourselves, and that's a tragedy. Sometimes we fear that our flickering flame is not enough.

But not to worry. *It's not our light to begin with!* The spirited little flame, dancing atop our candle wicks, came from someplace else. It's part of a vastly greater fire, the flame of love that burns at the very heart of this God-touched universe.

During the most trying and desperate days of America's early history, a man wrote a notably gloomy letter to Benjamin Franklin. He concluded his letter with these pessimistic words: "The sun of liberty has set."

Old Franklin wrote back to him the briefest of notes. It said: "*Then light the candles!*"

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined (9:2).*

Because it is true that on us light has shined, because we *have* glimpsed the great light beaming into our darkness, we light our candles. We hold them high. We sing praise to the Son of God, whom our carol names as "*love's pure light*":

*Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.*

Let us lift our lights high, so all the world can see. We now welcome the shepherds and the Holy Family as we listen to the story in Luke 2:1-20 . . . ¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they

were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

May the peace of God . . .