

## SALVATION MADE VISIBLE

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

December 24, 2001

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Christmas tells the story of a light coming into a land of deep darkness. I want us to peer for a while into the darkness before we come to the light. We'll never know how much we need Christ's light unless we honestly confront the darkness. Darkness is probably what we fear most. If we pray, darkness is probably what we pray most to escape. If we don't pray, the darkness is probably what has caused us to stop praying (Buechner).

We are a people who walk in darkness and live in a land of deep darkness. I think, first, of the world's darkness. Matthew Arnold wrote,

*We are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

There's a lot of truth in what he said. Americans are typically optimistic and would rather talk about light than darkness, yet even the most optimistic American experienced darkness on September 11. "Darkness is what our newspapers are about. Darkness is what most of our best contemporary literature is about" (Buechner). You'd think science could dispel the gloomy clouds of night. But despite the miracles of modern science there's been more darkness, more human slaughter, in our century than in any other. We live in a world of deep darkness.

But, secondly, there's often the darkness of depression in our hearts. A close friend and wonderful Christian wrote of her descent into the deep well of depression,

*The well has returned for me.  
Deep.  
Cold.  
Very, very dark.  
Nothing is heard down here,*

*only felt.  
Deep.  
Cold,  
Dark, wet fear.*

The darkness of depression is epidemic. Tomorrow a chair will remain empty at someone's Christmas feast, a stocking deliberately *not* hung by the chimney. After the death of his son a father prayed, "Where are you (God) in this darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I cannot find you. Will my eyes adjust to this darkness? Will I find you in the dark?" (Wolterstorff, 69) Depression often darkens our hearts at Christmas.

Thirdly, there's the darkness of doubt. Sometimes we lie awake in the darkness and question our deepest beliefs. Is the Christmas story too good to be true? In the immensity of infinite spaces did God really visit our small planet in the backwaters of our insignificant galaxy? Do we merely project our need of a God onto the universe as Sigmund Freud asserted?

---

Sometimes we lie awake in the darkness wondering how we can believe God has come to us in Jesus Christ. The darkness of doubt frightens us.

Fourthly, there's the darkness of death. As we grow older, friends and companions drop off one by one like leaves from a tree in winter and we dare not ask for whom the bell will toll next.

*Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.* (Edna St. Vincent Millay)

Death is a land of deep darkness.

"Stop!" you say. "Enough of the darkness!" Maybe you feel I've dwelt too long on darkness but we will not realize how much we need Christ's light without confronting darkness

as honestly as Eugene O'Neil did in his *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Only then will we realize how much we need Christ to lead us on our long night's journey into light.

Isaiah proclaimed, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." He writes in the past tense. He probably referred to an Israelite prince whose birth brought joy in a time of deep darkness. Syria threatened in the north, Assyria in the East, Egypt in the South. But the birth of a prince brought hope like a bright beam of light. Upon him were the hopes and fears of all the years, hopes for peace, hopes for security, hopes for the whole world under his wise and benevolent reign. But the accolades heaped on the newborn prince go beyond ordinary princely titles - *Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*. So Christians augur that Isaiah prophesied the birth and kingdom of Christ. We boldly attribute to Jesus titles inappropriate to any other human. In his birth a great light has shined upon us. Christmas proclaims a God who comes to humans groping in darkness.

---

Christ was born in the darkness we fear. We don't know the exact date. We don't know the exact month. We don't even know the exact year. We *can* be fairly sure, however, that Jesus was born in darkness. *There were shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night*. Christ was born in the dark. Joseph had to lift a lantern so Mary could see her newborn's face, yet that child has brought light to people *who live in a land of deep darkness*. Jesus is a light in the dark that will never go out. *The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has never quenched it*.

A schoolboy asked his friend, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" "To be a Christian," he said, "means there are all kind of things you shouldn't do like cheating, lying, swearing and listening to dirty stories." Then suddenly his face lit up. "No, it's not that. Do you really want to know what it means to be a Christian? It means waking up in the in the middle of

the night, in the dark, and you hear strange noises and you're scared to death and afraid to breathe or move - and then you remember you belong to Christ and you turn over and go to sleep again. That's what it means to be a Christian." (D. W. Cleverley Ford)

Friends, I so much want all of us to know that we belong to Christ and, because of Jesus, the darkness will never overcome us. The angel of the Lord stands before us tonight. The glory of the Lord shines upon us. The Angel of the Lord goes through the world visiting the blind. Sometimes she finds the damage that has blinded people is not too bad and enables them to see everything clearly. But often the damage is too much for her to heal. When she's unable to completely restore sight to the blind, there's another gift she can bestow. She can make the blind see light instead of darkness.

Tonight I invite you to see the light of Christ shining in the darkness. I invite you to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. I invite you to receive the light of Christ. Christ came in the dark so that we should never wholly fear the dark again. May our candles be signs that Christ's light will shine in the dark places of the world and in our hearts. There's no darkness so deep that the light of Christ cannot dispel it. Darkness in the form of sin and evil, doubt and despair will not have the final word. Christ has come to turn all our sunsets into dawns. And as we light our candles tonight, I invite us, not only to receive the light of Christ, but to remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light - that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Light.

AMEN