

24 December 2015 (Christmas Eve)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
**“A Great Light”**  
Luke 2:1-20

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” A great light. If it comes upon you suddenly after your eyes are accustomed to the darkness, it can leave you blinded and cringing. A great light suggests enormous power, maybe a power too great to bear. And yet, the light offers such welcome relief to the fear and unseen terrors of the darkness, its power must be more healing than harmful. Even when it exposes what seems better left unspoken and unseen, the great light offers relief, and the peace that all will be well. This is the great light described by the prophet Isaiah, a light that would never go out, because the power behind it is God’s *shalom*—God’s everlasting peace.

In Isaiah’s poetic expression, the manifestation of this great light is a child, a son with divine attributes, a “wonder of a counselor,” in Isaiah’s Hebrew, mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace—God’s *shalom*, God’s everlasting peace. Any of these four titles by itself would be a home run, but together, they leave no doubt as to the uniquely divine nature of God’s promised redemption. As God’s answer to the world’s darkness, this great light would appear as someone powerful but small, as someone wise but a child, as strength but comforting. Only the power of God could provide such redemption and *shalom* to a world beset with darkness and evil, a great light powerful enough to wipe away sin and oppression without destroying the world.

If ever there was a prophecy relevant to our world’s darkness, it is this text of Isaiah Chapter 9. To be sure, it offered the promise of light, redemption, and joy to the exiled people of Israel, but as the impact of Jesus’s ministry spread, Isaiah’s prophetic promise seemed to extend beyond Israel, beyond one place or time. And once the early church grasped the significance of Jesus and put the pieces of the puzzle together, they recognized in the risen Christ the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah. And as Luke composed his Gospel from sources unique to his research, the account of Jesus’ birth with shepherds seeing a great light became more than the hallucinations of overly tired shepherders. The great light in the field was Isaiah’s great light that shone in the darkness and gave joy to the people of God who had waited for it for so long.

We live in a culture that longs to hear about the great light in the sky and the birth of the child, but the story has been largely sentimentalized because we have allowed it to be recast in our own image. In our culture, every newborn becomes the Christ child, every shining star the one that guided the strangers from the east, every homeless couple Mary and Joseph seeking a place to stay. But the story told by Luke isn’t supposed to be a reflection of us. It’s a reflection of God’s love for the world, and God’s power to reveal light in the midst of darkness. God chose Mary, just as God chose Elizabeth and Zechariah, to fulfill a divine purpose. And Mary and Joseph were common folk just like us, but their mission was unique and unrepeatable in the history of the world. The circumstances of Jesus’s birth were extraordinary—Luke wants to make sure his readers

get that—because the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy was extraordinary. Israel had been waiting centuries for this fulfillment, centuries filled with defeat and heartache and darkness. But when the light appeared, it was not like anything else. Jesus wasn’t like every other child, and his destiny wouldn’t be that of every other failed zealot who wanted to throw off his people’s yoke of oppression. The child whose birth we celebrate this night would transcend even Isaiah’s vision of Israel’s redemption. The child would bring God’s *shalom*, God’s everlasting peace, to the whole world.

The message we hear and celebrate this night holds a promise for every person who has ever lived. For anyone who has ever mourned, or been betrayed, or defeated, who has felt too tired to care anymore, or too cynical to hope; for anyone who feels he can do anything, or that she is on top of the world, who worries about how long his luck will hold out, or how much harder she is going to have to work to stay where she is—the child whose birth we celebrate this night is for you. It doesn’t matter whether you’re at the bottom of the pit trying to crawl out, or on top of the world looking down, darkness always seems to be at the center of who we are. We yearn for the light, a great light that will remove the terrors and lift our burdens, that will soothe our hurts and heal our anger. We long for a light that will bring joy to the world, and to us, and to those around us who suffer. And the good news is, God has answered those yearnings and those longings. God has caused a great light to shine upon us and we need no longer walk in darkness. Christ is born, God with us and for us.

In his letter to Titus, the Apostle Paul reminds him that because the grace of God appeared in the form of Jesus Christ, a new life has been given to each person. That means that we have been given the freedom to live differently. We don’t have to walk in darkness. The world doesn’t have to walk in darkness. We have been given the power to become children of God, all because God chose to be born in our midst and to give us light. This great light can dispel any darkness, lift any burden, and redeem any lost soul. The question is whether we will receive the light, whether we will let it shine into the dark places of our hearts and give us God’s *shalom*, God’s everlasting peace, forever. The Christ child is born, and we are thus reborn.



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