

Christmas Eve 2017
Luke 2:1-2

The Hidden Christ

Thanks to Nola for the creative story telling. Jesus' birth story has captured the attention of many an artist throughout history. This narrative in which Mary and Joseph find no room at the inn and are relegated to a shed to give birth to Jesus has been repeatedly recreated. The story is painted in cathedrals all over the world. Crèche scenes continue to be found in homes or even front yards. Some of you have your own memories of Christmas pageants. In one of the livelier re-enactments in our house, our 4 year old son as Joseph pressured our 6 year old son as the inn keeper for a place to stay. After a couple of firm refusals, the younger Joseph took out his frustration by slugging the inn-keeper right on the chin. Mayhem ensued. And who knows? It may not have been far off from Joseph's own frustration. Joseph and Mary's story of fleeing political danger and struggling to find a home continues to resemble the reality that many refugees around the world encounter today, some of you here tonight.

In the previous chapter in Luke's gospel after Mary's song which we heard a moment ago, we find another song. That song is from Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin. Zechariah too received a message, a message indicating that the son in Elizabeth's womb would prepare the way for the Messiah. After the shock of this reality, Zechariah broke free from a period of silence to announce that the birth of the coming King would be like a light dawning from on high, bringing light to the darkness, bringing light to those who sit in the shadow of death.

Two thousand years later, all around the earth tonight, nearly 1/3 of the world's population will be celebrating Jesus' birth, many lighting candles as have already and will later to announce Jesus' birth as the dawn of light in a dark world.

Naming the Darkness

Still this light often seems *hidden* in our world today. I want to suggest tonight that this light wasn't obvious *back then* in First century Palestine any more than it is today. Reflect for a moment how hidden that light must have seemed there 2000 years ago. The coming of this promised king was not in a palace or even the more respectable part of the house. Instead, Jesus was likely born in the bottom of a house where the animals roamed in and out, hence the feeding trough in which Jesus' was laid. Nor was the birth of this king announced to the elites or the powerful of the day in a way that would have made the headlines: Instead, his coming was made known to a group of sheep herders, folks who would have been considered rugged or uncouth at best and untrustworthy bandits at worst.

What's more is that Luke frames the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of the reign of Caesar Augustus, arguably the most powerful man in world at the time. There were coins you can still look at today that name Augustus as the son of God, the savior and Lord of the world. Jesus was crucified at the hands of that same Roman Empire thirty years or so after his birth, rolled over like so many of those whom the empire perceived as a threat.

The light of Christ came in hidden places and was not obvious to many then. And that light is not obvious to many if not most of us in our day either. That light still seems hidden. Partly because the darkness is so vast and ever before us. There are plenty of realities that make the world dark. Sometimes the injustice of growing economic inequality within nations or among them makes the world dark. Sometimes the injustice as a country with our First nation's

folk darkens our history, a reality that hit many of us viscerally at Tom McGregor's death two weeks ago at the untimely age of only 39. Sometimes the opaqueness of meaning in a universe 13 billion years old that seems like the Roman Empire to roll over a lot of innocent creatures can make the world seem like a dark place. Or the challenges of climate change can darken our hope for the future.

Other times, it is the personal losses we experience that make the world dark. As a community, we've known these dark personal times. For some, it has been the death of a loved one. For others, it has been the seeming death of a dream, dreams of relationship or vocation, dreams of a return to bodily health or dreams of freedom from depression. And sometimes it is the darkness within us that scares us most, our own propensity for wounding others, ignoring those in need, or self-medicating addictions.

Do you know this darkness? Do you feel overwhelmed by it at times?

The Divine Light Comes in Small Places

If we learn anything about the light of God in the birth of Jesus, it is this: the light come in these small, rather hidden places, subtly, like a manger in a Palestinian city that was surprisingly announced by shepherds. These small places are where the divine light is to be found.

But that light IS to be found. This is the good news of Jesus' birth. The light does come. God has come into this vulnerable situation described by Luke's gospel to share our plight, to enter into the darkness, even to the point of death. When Jesus was seen to be alive, resurrected from the dead by over 500 witnesses who were still alive when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Paul says that this good news was now spreading around the empire. The light had not only come, the darkness of death could not overcome it.

In the 2000 years since then, amidst a church history sometimes splattered with darkness, this abiding light has continued to shine forth. It shined forth when followers of this Messiah took in abandoned babies in the first centuries of the church, and when monastic communities built hospitals and universities, when they saved and copied most of the texts that we have from antiquity, and when followers of Christ have continued to be drivers in providing medical and development efforts around the majority world today.

It's this same light that has slowly shone on us here at Grandview and that has begun to light our way, to change us. We've seen that light in the vision and power that God that has given us to respond to refugees, to those who are homeless, with unemployed and single moms. We've seen the light in the small but significant steps towards healing with our First nations, or by those who have taken risks to work for justice and truth in their workplaces, or by those who have taken up sacrificial practices in order to live within the limits of our created world rather than exploiting it further. We've seen the light of God in a vision to build housing over our parking lot, a vision that comes to fruition in only weeks. We've seen the light in God's personal healing in our own wounds or our conflicted, broken relationships.

Yes, these efforts are all partial, incomplete, hidden. But in Christ and the renewing work of the Spirit in the world today, there is light for the weary and searching traveler. The light has come and the darkness has not overcome it.

In fact, this longing and searching for the fullness of this light and the obliteration of the darkness – this desire that runs so deeply within us and which itself never dies – is also a sign and pointer to the reality of a transcendent God. For God comes in Jesus not only to work restoration among us now, his resurrection stands as a sign of the divine commitment to one day

flood the entire creation with light and goodness, to finally and fully complete these deep longings God has implanted within us..

Indeed, one of the symbols of this renewed creation in the last book of the Bible is a city in which there is no need for light. The writer puts it this way: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no more night.” No more night. No more shut gates. Beauty restored. The Light of the Lamb filling the earth. This is our destiny in Christ. This is the destiny of our world. This is the Hope of Christmas. Praise be to God. Amen.

Lost and weary traveler
Searching for the way to go
Stranger, heavy-hearted
Longing for someone you know

May you find a light
May you find a light
May you find a light
To guide you home

There are weary travelers
Searching everywhere you go
Strangers who are searching
Longing deeply to be known

A light shone down on us
A star of hope shines bright
A light shines bright
A light shines bright

