

God lights up our darkness
Luke 2
Christmas Eve, 12/24/07
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Scene 1 No place for them in the inn

To perceive Christmas through its wrappings becomes more difficult with every year. Well, it is tempting to think of the innkeeper as a burly, unfeeling villain. But I hold a different image of him. I imagine he wanted to provide Mary and Joseph with a room. But because of everyone else returning to Bethlehem for the census, all the inns in town had been filled for days. And going to the cave that served as a shelter for livestock, was his creative work around.

I realize I am preaching to the choir today. I realize I am preaching to the ones who made time on Christmas Eve to join the shepherds and kneel at the manger of the new born baby. But I suspect all of us have had moments when we forget about God while planning our social or work or family calendars. Not because we are hostile to God, but because we are "filled up" with other things. Everything seems to conspire to fill our days with life's transients, and then, when Eternity knocks on our door, seeking a place, we have to report that our rooms are all full. We are like that innkeeper. We shut God out, not because we hate him, but because we are preoccupied. But for the most part, those of you here, when you plan for family, or work, or social events, you do not forget about God. Because you put God first. You schedule social, family, and work around worship and Bible study, because God's Word encourages and strengthens you. You schedule social, family, and work around leading a Bible study or prayer group, or feeding the homeless, or leading worship in a nursing home.

We often learn the most from our children. There is a story about a man who punished his 3-year-old daughter for wasting a roll of gold wrapping paper. Money was tight, and he became mad when the child tried to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree. Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift to her father the next morning and said, "This is for you, Daddy."

The father was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction once he realized the gift was for him. He opened the gift, but his anger flared again when he found that the box was empty. He yelled at her, "Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside of it?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh, Daddy it's not empty. I blew kisses into the box. All for you, Daddy." The father was crushed. He put his arms around his little girl, and he begged her forgiveness. He kept that gold box by his bed for years. Whenever he was discouraged, he would take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there.

In a very real sense, each of us has been given a gold container filled with unconditional love and kisses from God. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, God's "one and only Son," we have the access to eternal life.

While there are those times when it seems as if God has left us to make it on our own, and there are those times when it appears as if we cannot go any further in life, there is no more precious possession anyone could hold than the gold box filled with the love of God.

Because when you do make room in your busy schedule to come to worship and Bible study. When you do light your candle with God's Word. Then your life becomes God's candle that lights the path for others.

Scene 2 The glory of the Lord shone around them

The shepherds are minding their own business, huddled around campfires, hugging the sheep to stay warm. I imagine it is cold out that night, the night Mary's son was born, cold out like tonight. I imagine it is also pitch black that night, except for the Eastern sky where is occurring the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. It is dark that night. A night like tonight. But the lives of these shepherds are also dark. Because most shepherds are society's rejects. They drink heavily, they live outside all day and all night with the sheep, and they smell bad. The heavy drinking, the smelling bad, and society's rejection is the true darkness in their lives.

We all have times when our lives seem dark. An unexpected pregnancy. When a child is born with a birth defect. When a miscarriage occurs. When you discover your spouse has been unfaithful. When your spouse files for divorce. When you are fired. When you are diagnosed with a chronic illness. When you finally realize that you, yes you, have a chemical dependency. When your parent or a spouse dies. When a child dies. All of us have dark times in our lives.

Suddenly an angel, followed by a multitude of angels, light up the night sky, as the glory of the Lord shines around them. A light which chases away all darkness. And God invites them, yes them, society's rejects, to a birthday party. Who would have thought that someone with a chemical dependency and who smells bad would be invited to come as they are to a birthday party!

Mary's and Joseph's unexpected pregnancy can be seen as a curve ball, but they choose instead to see this as a blessing. So can we see unexpected pregnancies. When a boss fires you, you can turn crisis into opportunity. There is a reason the Chinese symbol for both is the same. If you have a chemical dependency, you can enter a 12 step program. They have them for all sorts of problems now. And for those dark times in your life when you cannot yourself see a blessing, cannot see light in the midst of your darkness, God's Word through worship and prayer will light up your life. Will light up your life with hope and fellowship and comfort. God's Word will be a lamp unto your feet, a light of hope for your path.

Yes, God's Word lights up our darkness. Lights up our darkness by allowing us to see the world differently. Differently than we can otherwise imagine.

Scene 3 Paradox of Jesus birth

Some years ago, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an article by Dr. Paul Ruskin on the "Stages of Aging." In the article, Dr. Ruskin described a case study he had presented to his students when teaching a class in medical school. He described the case study patient under his care like this:

"The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however, respond to her name... I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist her own care. She must be fed, bathed, and clothed by others.

"Because she has no teeth, her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often she wakes in the middle of the night and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her."

After presenting the class with this challenging case, Dr. Ruskin then asked his students if any of them would like to volunteer to take care of this person. No one volunteered. Then Dr. Ruskin said, "I'm surprised that none of you offered to help, because actually she is my favorite patient. I

get immense pleasure from taking care of her and I am learning so much from her. She has taught me a depth of gratitude I never knew before. She has taught me the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught me the power of unconditional love.” Then Dr. Ruskin said, “Let me show you her picture.”

He pulled out the picture and passed it around. It was the photo of his six-month-old baby daughter.

Queen Elizabeth II recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars.

In contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him.

Before the first Christmas, God's coming is feared by some as is a physically or verbally abusive landlord. But the Christmas suggests an alternative vision. And Christmas turns the world upside down! It suggests God comes to us not as an enormous military conqueror, whose presence and judgment is to be feared, but instead as a small baby in a feeding tray for animals. It suggests God does not come to us in huge, boastful, physical strength, but in the weakness of a small package. Born in a tiny humble package, God comes to rule over all with love, tumbling down the walls of hostility which divide us. Poor in things of the world, we see in a little infant the wealth of God's grace. Rejected and overlooked by innkeepers, we see in the humble housing of a tiny child that all are welcome, smelly shepherds and strange astronomers alike. Yes, Christmas reflects back on God's coming to a community of faith 2000 years ago. But Christmas also looks forward.

The future “second coming” means different things to different communities of faith. One tradition is that 2000 years ago, God came once and for all, but not all at once! That is, God comes to us a little every day. For God comes to us in small flickers of light. Comes to us each day as the flickers of tiny blessings, little smiles, and small words of encouragement. Small flickers of light we experience every day but tend to reject and overlook. Reject and overlook as did the innkeeper 2000 years ago. If only we had the eyes to see and the ears to hear!

These are some of the things psychiatrists hear from their patients:

When I was young, my mother was going to read me a story, but she had to wax the bathroom floor and there wasn't time.

When I was young, my grandparents were going to come for Christmas, but they couldn't get someone to feed the dogs and my grandfather did not like the cold weather and besides they didn't have time.

When I was young, my father was going to listen to me read my essay on "What I Want To Be When I Grow Up," but there was Monday Night Football and there wasn't time.

When I was young, my father and I were going to go hiking, but at the last minute he had to fertilize the lawn and there wasn't time.

When I grew up and left home to be married, I was going to sit down with Mom and Dad and tell them I love them and would miss them, but my best man was honking the horn in front of my

house so there wasn't time.

Into our hectic world, Jesus comes, and still invites us to exercise the spirit as well as the mind and the body. The best way we exercise the spirit is by giving attention to things of eternal significance, such as listening, loving, and learning from the least expected places.

When we open the *eyes* and *ears* of our hearts, and make room in the *inns* of our hearts for the anticipation of God's daily coming, we can at last remove our yoke. The yoke of our exhaustion, loneliness, despair, fear, bitterness, and the false feeling of being subject to fate.

Conclusion

When we make room in the inns of our hearts for the little things, God lights up our darkness. God comes to us in human flesh to save us **from** our brokenness, encouraging us to make room in our lives **for** God's Light **through** worship and service to others. Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...