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Sermon Notes

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The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light

Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 2:8-14

On Christmas Eve in 1841, Queen Victoria's German husband Prince Albert set up the first *Tannenbaum* – Christmas tree – in the history of England in Windsor Castle. The tree was decorated with various artistic ornaments, and in order to show the beauty of these ornaments was also lit with dozens of actual white candles stuck to the branches with wax.

This tradition caught on in Victorian England and soon spread across the ocean to America. President Franklin Pierce set up a Christmas tree in the White House in 1856, and the tradition has been a fixture in our celebration of Christmas ever since.

I can hardly imagine, however, the number of house fires that must have ensued... actual burning candles stuck to the branches of dead pine trees sounds to me like a recipe for disaster. In 1882, however, the tradition took a decided turn toward the safer side. Two years earlier, Thomas Edison had invented the electric light bulb, and in 1882 his good friend Edward Hibberd Johnson applied the new technology to the Christmas tree. At a townhouse at 136 East 36th Street in New York City, Johnson set up a tree by the street-side window of his parlor in full display of the pedestrians that bustled past. Johnson hand-wired eighty red, white, and blue electric light bulbs, encased each of them in delicate glass eggs, and strung them together around the branches of his tree. He then placed the tree on a revolving pedestal powered by a generator. The effect was stunning. New Yorkers stood in huge numbers transfixed on the sidewalk, gazing at the rotating tree. In subsequent years, Johnson kept increasing the numbers of bulbs on the tree. Of course, Johnson

and Edison saw these as a commercial venture and made strings of Christmas lights available to the general public... but they were luxury items. A string of 16 bulbs cost \$12... roughly \$340 today.

Christmas is a season of light... most people decorate in some way with lights.

One of my favorite childhood Christmas memories was driving into Boston from my suburb home of Framingham Massachusetts to see the lights in the Boston Common... the City of Boston hung an overwhelming quantity of multi-colored lights... I loved seeing how high the lights were placed on top of the tallest trees in the Common... over eighty feet in the air

So also everywhere in our region, you can see the multicolored lights strung up on people's homes, on the trees, on telephone poles, in city parks, on highrises and in office buildings... downtown Durham, on Mangum Street, there is an array of radiant blue lights hung on all the branches; in the American Tobacco Campus, the famous Lucky Strike water tower is draped in lights

For me these colored lights represent the birth of Christ into the world:

John 8:12 "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

But in order to understand the gift of Christ's light, we need to understand the darkness that preceded his coming...

It is a powerful darkness, a pervasive darkness, a darkness that could be felt, a gloomy, deep, thick darkness... the darkness of the land of the shadow of death.

A number of years ago, I experienced darkness in a way I had never experienced it before. For many years, our family enjoyed a vacation time in Lake Gaston just over the Virginia border... and I enjoyed the beautiful fall foliage in a bike ride from our

home in Bahama to the lake house where we were staying. But one year, that beautiful ride turned to a nightmare. I got a very late start and should never have set out. Simple mathematics would tell me there weren't enough daylight hours left in the day to complete the ride. But I stubbornly and foolishly set out anyway. I had my smartphone with me, so I figured I'd be fine. The day was indeed lovely, the weather perfect, and off I went... mile after mile... but the shadows lengthened more and more, and finally the sun did indeed do what it always does at the end of the day – it set. I had a few more twilight minutes, but I was still many miles from my destination. And soon, I was cast into total darkness. Then I pulled my smartphone out of my biking shirt pocket and was horrified to learn that the satellite tracking app I'd been using to map my ride had drained the battery entirely. My phone was completely dead. I was now incommunicado in a very rural part of northern North Carolina... and the night was entirely devoid of light. No moon, no stars... I guess there was a cloud cover. A total darkness... like the Bible says about the plague of darkness in Egypt – a darkness that could be felt.

I had crossed the state line, but I was still ten miles from the end. I started walking, but I could literally see nothing at all... not the edge of the road... no trees, no houses, not a bit of helpful light. I was a man walking in the darkness. And I was in great danger. I realized how much our life and our safety depend on light.

Without light, we cannot eat, for photosynthesis mysteriously and ultimately supplies all the nourishment of the creatures of planet earth. Without light, we cannot move either... for how can we know which direction to take.

Today, we are going to probe the dimensions of the darkness into which Jesus was born... and to celebrate the gift of eternal light that comes through faith in his name.

I. A People Walking in Darkness

Isaiah 9:2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

A. The Immediate Context

Isaiah 8:19-21 When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. ²¹ Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.

1. Intense spiritual darkness

- a. The nation of Israel was walking in spiritual darkness
- b. They had imitated the pagan religions of the nations that were around them... including Baal worship, and the Ashtoreth, and Molech... child sacrifice, fertility rituals, utter wickedness
- c. They had rejected the word of God and were seeking spiritual truth from other sources
- d. Furthermore, they were into occult practices...
- e. They were consulting mediums and spiritists... consulting the dead on behalf of the living; séances, necromancy, witchcraft; remember how King Saul did this the night before he died
- f. But the pure word of God, the Laws of Moses, and all the scriptures that followed that they had rejected
 - i) That's why Isaiah says, "To the law and to the testimony!"
 - ii) He stated clearly that if they did not speak according to the Word of God, they had no light at all to offer
- g. They were a "people walking in darkness"

- h. This darkness resulted in them being intensely angry, enraged at life, enraged at God
- 2. The terrible spiritual condition of Israel at the time of Christ's birth is captured in the clear words of this ancient prophecy
- 3. The good news comes with a simple turn of a phrase... a single word saying the reign of darkness will come to an end

Isaiah 9:1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

- 4. A pure, perfect, eternal light was coming into the world, and it would drive away forever that darkness

B. Darkness a Powerful Symbol

- 1. Throughout the Bible, darkness is a symbol of evil... of a world going astray from God
- 2. Darkness first and foremost represents evil... anti-God, the absence of the goodness of God

Genesis 1:3-4 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

- 3. Therefore darkness represents Satan and his evil kingdom... a kingdom of darkness

Colossians 1:13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves

Ephesians 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

- 4. Darkness also represents ignorance... not knowing the truth...

We speak of the Middle Ages in Europe as the “Dark Ages.” People use that expression to speak of the effect of marauding barbarian tribes like the Visigoths, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Huns, and the Vikings, that had no respect for learning and culture... they crushed the remnants of the western Roman Empire destroying libraries, burning scrolls, destroying all culture, and sinking people into the darkness of ignorance – lack of knowledge. Well, that’s a secular view of darkness. The Bible has its own sense of the mental process of darkness... of not knowing truth, of not knowing God himself... of turning away from the true God to idols and dark images and a dark and wicked lifestyle that flows from that mental darkness

Ephesians 4:17-18 ... you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

In Psalm 119:105, The Word of God is represented as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path... therefore, darkness represents ignorance, not seeing the path, not knowing what way to go

This spiritual blindness engulfs the entirety of our existence

Matthew 6:22-23 "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

5. So darkness also represents the evil life that comes from that moral, spiritual ignorance... stumbling in the darkness, not knowing which way to go... this is what it means to WALK IN DARKNESS

Isaiah 59:9-10 ... justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. ¹⁰ Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.

The Bible has many descriptions of the lifestyle of darkness that unbelievers live out daily:

Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

6. Darkness represents also the illusion of doing evil deeds in secret that no one can see

Isaiah 29:15 Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"

John 3:20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

7. Darkness represents persistent, willful spiritual blindness... the inability to see, to recognize the truth even if it is shining right in front of you

2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

8. Darkness represents HOPELESSNESS... if hope is a feeling that the future is bright, then hopelessness is a feeling that the future is dark... no good thing is ahead, nothing to look forward to

Job 30:26 Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.

The essence of this hopelessness is the terror of death, which stands over everything we do and mocks it

Isaiah 9:2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

The terror of death is acute, because death cannot be predicted... it comes unannounced whenever it wills, and instantly ends everything we hoped for in this world

Hebrews 2 says that, before Christ, all people walked daily in the fear of death. Death looms darkly, standing over us at every moment. What then is the point of all we strive for, all that we love, all that we build? For we must die and leave it all behind, and within a short time all of it will be reduced to dust. Darkness. The darkness of the GRAVE:

Job 10:20-22 Are not my few days almost over? ... I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow, ²² to the land of deepest night, of deep shadow and disorder, where even the light is like darkness."

9. Darkness represents judgment from God... taking away the gift of sight, giving people over to their ways

Exodus 10:21 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt-- darkness that can be felt."

Revelation 16:10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness.

10. Finally, darkness represents eternal damnation—the absence of every good gift of God, an eternal blindness... no beauty, no goodness, no blessing... just wrath and judgment from God, being on the outside, stripped of every good and perfect gift

Matthew 8:12 the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

These are the dimensions of the darkness the Bible describes. This is what it means in Isaiah 9:2 when it speaks of a people WALKING IN DARKNESS... mental darkness, moral darkness, emotional darkness, and especially spiritual darkness – “without hope and without God in the world”

Friends, apart from Christ, this same darkness is over our world to this present day. Satan continues to spread the darkness of his lies and his hatred of God, to blind people’s minds and harden people’s hearts, to send people false teachers who are the blind leading the blind.

This is why the true light of Christmas is so beautiful.

II. A Great Light Has Dawned

A. The Prophecy Made

Isaiah 9:2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

Through the prophetic gift of Isaiah, God predicted the coming of his only begotten Son in terms of a great light that would dawn...

John 1:4-5 In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

So, Isaiah predicted the coming of a light that would drive away forever the deep darkness of the people of God... a great light that would dawn forever

And it all started with a stunning, supernatural light on the hills outside Bethlehem

B. A Physical Light in Bethlehem

Luke 2:8-9 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

A number of years ago, I went on a mission trip to Kenya. I spent many weeks out in the rural parts of western Kenya, where there were many farms – corn fields, and a simple rural life. I realized how accustomed I was as an American to electric light extending the day way beyond sunset. But in rural Kenya, after the sunset, they would use fires and gas lanterns for a short time to eat dinner and finish a few tasks... then, they went to bed.

In the rural parts of our globe still, the night is dark, and the only light is firelight. How much more two thousand years ago when electric light had not yet been invented.

These simple shepherds outside Bethlehem were guarding their flocks at night, looking up at the night sky. They were used to the stars, the moonlight, and the deep richness of the night. Suddenly their dark world was ripped apart by an overpowering supernatural light.

Luke tells us an angel of the Lord appeared, and with him was the GLORY OF THE LORD. This radiant light instantly terrified them. The KJV says powerfully, "They were sore afraid."

God's glory can do that! As matter of fact, our future heavenly home will be lit for all eternity with the glory of God:

Revelation 21:23-24 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

The reaction of the shepherd was predictable... sheer terror!

But the angel spoke the words angels so often have to say:

"Fear not!!" "Do not be afraid!!"

Just like the Son of God himself, the angel did not descend to destroy people but that people might be saved.

So the angel gave the wonderful GOOD NEWS he had been tasked to announce:

Luke 2:10-12 I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Dear friends, this is the whole point of Christmas... the reality of who this baby was, what he was coming to do!

The "good news" is of a "great joy" for all the people

Isaiah likened the joy to a vast celebration:

Isaiah 9:3 They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.

The giving of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world is a limitless source of joy... he is the spring of water welling up to eternal life

Though you may say "This is not 'news' to me... I've heard this story all my life!" yet I say to you, if you are true follower of Christ, you are still underestimating the significance of his entrance into the world and into your life! You are still underestimating the infinite complexity and majesty of his person... and you are underestimating how much joy Jesus still has to bring you, not only in this world but forever and ever in the world to come!

This is news that will never get old... there is always more to tell

The greatest significance of this news is the word "Savior" ... who is born "TO YOU" ... a personal Savior

You yourself, as a human being, as a sinner, stand in need of this Savior... because of your sins and I say because of mine, we stand rightly under the terrifying wrath and judgment of God. There would be no escape for us, for Almighty God sees everywhere we go, and can reach us at any time. Christ alone is the refuge, and he was given by God to be exactly that – a refuge, a shelter from the wrath of God, a Savior who will take away the death penalty we have earned for our sins

And the angel said plainly this Savior is born TO YOU... for each of us personally.

And yet, the angel made it plain that this good news was for ALL PEOPLE... people all over the world, to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

This baby who was being born that night was also called ***Christ, the Lord***

The word Christ means the anointed one, the descendent of David, the promised one... more on that in a moment; but he is also

announced as LORD... GOD; This is the infinite mystery of the incarnation

The shepherds could not have fully understood it. Indeed, no creature will ever fully understand it, though we study it for all eternity

So... this was the astonishing message given by this single angel robed in the glory of the Lord. But God had yet more glory to pour out on these simple shepherds... and the text introduces it with the word SUDDENLY

C. Suddenly...the Armies of Heaven Join In

Luke 2:13-14 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

This is one of those amazing times we've spoken of recently, of the rending of the barrier between the physical world and the spiritual realms.

"A great company" ... we don't know how many; Daniel 7:10 and Revelation 5:11 both speak of one hundred million angels... we don't know if the shepherds could see all of them, or just as smaller detachment than this full number

"the heavenly host" ... the Greek word translated "host" relates to an army, soldiers in a vast array ready to go forth to battle; but this night, they are not there to fight a battle, but to celebrate... to worship the baby being born

How do these host of heaven celebrate?

We always envision them singing, as an anthem... as Charles Wesley's most famous Christmas hymn says, "Hark the herald angels sing 'Glory to the newborn king!'"

But the Bible text doesn't say they sung anything... just that they "praised God saying...'

Luke 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

First, GLORY TO GOD!! This is the centerpiece of all worship... giving glory to God. But what does that mean?

Angels and human beings are created with the ability to perceive God's glory, to understand its dimensions, to celebrate its greatness. Neither angels nor humans are giving God anything he doesn't already possess. God is glorious, whether we see it or not! But the angels DO see it! In the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, they know that God is working out the greatest plan of all time, a plan to display every dimension and detail of his nature, every radiant beam of his glory

This is not merely glory to God, but glory to God IN THE HIGHEST DEGREE... Christ is the greatest display of the radiance of God's nature there ever has been or ever will be!

Hebrews 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being

Beyond that, the angels are celebrating this move of God from heaven to the earth... to give PEACE ON EARTH

This peace on earth is absolutely tied to the warfare that Satan has fostered between humanity and God. Because we joined Satan in his rebellion, God was at war with us!! But in sending Christ, God was ending that warfare forever between himself and his chosen people, those on whom his good favor rests:

Colossians 1:21-22 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation

Christ's physical body was given to end the warfare and ULTIMATELY to create the same peace on earth that there is in heaven. In the New Heaven and New Earth, there will be

perfect unity between heaven and earth, God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and there will be peace on earth forever

All because of the coming of Christ!

So the angelic host is celebrating! This army of heaven could easily have poured out of heaven onto earth like hot molten lava, killing every sinner on earth. But they knew God's plan was to save a multitude from every nation on earth by the work of his Son... so this heavenly host, this heavenly army was pleased, celebrating what the birth of Jesus as a HUMAN BEING meant! Peace, not war, between heaven and earth!

Concerning the second phrase, the most famous translation of this will always be the KJV: "Peace on earth, **good will toward men.**"

Most of the modern translations zero in a little more specifically on the word "favor" or "good will" ... that the gift is for those on whom God sets his grace. Not everyone will experience this peace with God... but the believers will:

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

So the angels were dispatched by God to celebrate the moment of his birth.

III. The Eternal Light: "To Us a Child Is Born"

A. The Essence of the Good News: A Miracle Child and a Perfect Kingdom

Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

B. The Mystery of the Incarnation in these Titles

1. A blending of the supernatural and the natural

2. “Wonderful” = miraculous... a wonder-worker; “Counsellor” = able to give us wise counsel... perfect words of truth, to guide us out of our darkness into God’s light
3. “Mighty God” = the first adjective often used of human heroes... but the second term is the stunner... GOD IN THE FLESH!
4. “Everlasting father” = again a blending of natural and supernatural terms... father is an ordinary term, but “everlasting” means eternal
5. “Prince of peace”: as the angel said, he came to bring “Peace on earth to those who receive God’s favor”

C. The Amazing Freedom of Christ’s Rule

1. The “government will be on his shoulders”
2. There have been many bad rulers, and even the best earthly rulers are flawed, like King David
3. Jesus is the perfect King to rule this eternal kingdom!

IV. Walking in the Glorious Light of Christ’s Kingdom

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

The angel’s light shined only temporarily, then the angels all went back into heaven, behind the veil that separates the physical world from the heavenly realms.

BUT the light of Christ and of his glorious kingdom still shines in this present darkness

- A. So... This Light Has Dawned... Will You Come Toward It or Flee From It In Terror?

John 3:19-21 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the

light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

John 8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

B. Specific Exhortations

1. Do not grieve over the present darkness we see in the world today... it really is nothing new... God's light is more powerful than any darkness we are presently experiencing
2. Trust in Christ... be drawn into him, his beautiful light
3. Understand that only Christ's glorious death on the cross can defeat the true darkness of sin and death and hell
4. Cast yourself wholly, with the abandonment of faith, into that ocean of light!
5. Then, walk in the light as he is in the light... put all the darkness of sin out of your heart and out of your life
6. Soak in the light of scripture... and walk with our pure God in the light of truth

Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.