



Sermon for the Christmas Eve, December 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#)

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

Welcome, dear people of God. Welcome and Merry Christmas!

Oh, friends, what a year it has been! What a year.

The challenges that have come with this pandemic, we never imagined how long and how hard this would be for everyone. What began back in February and March kept going. We hoped to celebrate a late Easter around the time of Pentecost in early June. But then we saw the rapid upturn in cases as people took to the feelings of freedom of outdoor life and carefree summer gatherings. We then hoped for things to settle down after the tourist season was over, but then cases went up even more in September following the start of school. We hoped things would settle out a bit, but cases have just continued to climb all this Fall and early Winter.

It feels like a dark time we are in.

And this Christmas feels strange.

It is still Christmas. It is still when we remember and celebrate our Savior's birth.

But it is a dark time we are in. The coronavirus has challenged us like nothing we have ever faced in our lifetimes. And the ugly ways that racism and racial tensions, deep economic inequities, and political divisions are fraying our nation and countries around the world are deeply troubling. It is a dark time we are in, with so much fragility and sinfulness in our humanity coming to the surface.

And so, friends, the words of Isaiah the prophet seem particularly right for us this year.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

How many of you have ever been in complete darkness? I mean, total darkness without any light?

It's hard to find places of complete or deep darkness. Night is never really completely dark. At night, we have the brightness of the moon's reflected light from our sun, and we have the many, many stars that help brighten the darkness so that we and other creatures can find our way. We spread light ourselves, as humans, with burning torches and spotlights that get reflected back from the atmosphere in a dim glow.

But there are places of deep darkness. Light is not available in all places. Walking in that kind of darkness, well, it's never easy and feels on the edge of impossible. Each move can feel like a question mark, a tentative little step and nudge, a feeling out in front of you to sense what might be just ahead or to the side.

Deep darkness.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And on those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.

I was talking about this passage with Cassie, my oldest kiddo, after I preached for our first early Christmas Eve service, earlier this week. She shared what she was thinking she might do with this if she were preaching. So, I've got some competition! She said, "The thing is, darkness is not the opposite of light. Just like silence is not the opposite of sound. Darkness is not a force. Light is. Darkness is just the absence of light. You can't cover light with darkness. But light always breaks through and overcomes darkness."

This is fantastic – and absolutely true. Light cuts through and invades and changes the darkness.

Think about what just happened this last week in the heavens. On the darkest night of the year, two planets in our solar system came into close alignment, so that they looked like one bright star. I know it was cloudy that night. But we got to see this from the South Hill in Spokane. And people have posted amazing photographs from all over the world. Something new happened that night. A new light – well, a new combination of bright reflected light – shone in the early night.

Not like the sun at noon. The bright convergence of Jupiter and Saturn was a beautiful light. But it did not turn the night to day.

So it was, and so it is still, with the coming of the Son of God.

Many think that something like this planetary convergence is what happened over 2000 years ago, and the magi, the wise men, who watched the skies saw this bright new light.

And it was then that Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, was born and began to shine in this world. God's light broke through the darkness.

But not so brightly as the sun at noon in the height of summer. Not suddenly with all the splendor and glory of God's light.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. A new light. Light that doesn't just dazzle with complete noonday shining, but light that breaks forth and brings enough light to the darkness so that all of us, all people and all creatures whom God loves, can see and begin to find our way.

This is how Christ Jesus, God incarnate, came and was born, lived, taught and touched, healed, died, and rose again – bringing light, shining new light in the darkness at every turn with every person and in every place.

Jesus is born, and new light dawns. But it is still dark. Life carries on, humanity carries on.

But the Light of God, the Love of God, has arrived, completely embodied in this one person.

This night begins the new story, the story we will walk through from Jesus' birth through his growing up and all of his amazing adult life, through his dying and his rising again. Light has come into the world, light has come into the darkness – and the darkness has not comprehended it. In each place Christ Jesus comes, darkness fades away.

Hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, when the kings of Israel and Judah began to drift further and further from God, following their own ambitions and abandoning God's ways, the people of Israel felt

the threat of decline within their nation as well as the threat of ever-growing powers of other nations and empires. Isaiah lived during a time of some wicked kings and saw coming the threat of takeover by the Assyrian Empire. There were civil wars between Israel and Judah. There were times of disease and disaster. We can glimpse how uncertain their world was – perhaps better this year than any time in recent history.

In these first chapters of Isaiah, the prophet holds out a promise. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And the oppressors will be overcome. “For a child has been born for us.” We see these words fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, God incarnate. And all the names given this child are names we see truly belong to Jesus – he comes and shines light person by person, group by group, place by place, as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

For hundreds of years, the people of Israel held these hopes – even as they saw the end of their nations of Israel and Judah, were carried away from their lands to be subjects of Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia, then the Greeks, then Rome. They held hopes in times when they began to rebuild with newly granted freedom, and in times when things once again began to crumble.

And it is into such an expectant, yearning world that Jesus is born – born of Mary, who herself knew the deep hopes of her people when she cried out with joyful expectation that God “scatters the proud in their conceit, casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and remembers his promise of mercy.” Jesus, light of the world, grows into these words and hears them, and lays claim to them deep in his bones. And Jesus lives out these words. At every turn, he heals, he shows the truth, he challenges, he comforts and invites, he frees – and he lives out the word he claims early in his ministry, as he read other words from the end of Isaiah, that portion of Isaiah written during or after the years of exile –

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the prisoners, to bring sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free.

New Light has dawned.

Friends, the Light of Christ is what this world needs, now as much as any time. And Christ is still among us. This Jesus, born in Bethlehem, lived, died, rose again, went on high, and comes among us with that same light that breaks through the darkness – the dark in our lives, in our society and nation and world. Person by person, group by group, moment by moment, place by place. So, the Light of God spreads over the earth. The darkness does not comprehend it. But the darkness has no power to oppose it.

Let the light of Christ draw near to you, shine in all places in your life, illumine those dark places, bring you sight, and give you sureness to find your way. Know that the light of Christ goes before you into all places, that this light is stirring and moving in every person and in yourself, that in every encounter with another person you meet Christ and bring Christ. Follow Christ in his story, and let your own story unfold in new ways with Christ as your companion.

Light has come. Darkness cannot overcome it or comprehend it. May you know Christ’s light, and love, and peace, strength, and joy, this Christmas and through this coming year.

Amen.