

“The Light of Christ”

24 December 2018: Christmas Eve

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Luke 2:1-20

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“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (—John 9:5).

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A United Methodist bishop of years ago, Bob Goodrich, tells the story of driving his family to Christmas Eve services. From the back seat, his six-year-old son asked, “Dad, are you going to just tell us the Christmas story this year, or are you going to try to explain it to us again” (1996 Christmas sermon by Dan Flanagan, pastor in the Nebraska Annual Conference)?

Our familiarity with the Christmas story sometimes gets in the way of a preacher’s best laid attempts at preaching a knock-out sermon at Christmas time. The all too familiar story has been in our hearts since we were old enough to talk. We have been to the nativity, we have seen the story in Christmas pageants, we have read the story in literature, and heard all about it in sermons. For any preacher to stand up and surprise you tonight with something new and unusual is the height of presumption, or at least, folly. I think the only thing I might do to Luke’s Christmas story is to mess it up. But it does bear hearing again, doesn’t it?

[2:1] In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] All went to their own towns to be registered. [4] Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. [5] He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. [6] While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[8] In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10] But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: [11] to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. [12] This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

**[14] “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”**

[15] When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” [16] So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in

the manger. [17] When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; [18] and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. [20] The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:1-20).

Isn't it interesting that Luke is such a name dropper? Have you ever noticed that about Luke? He likes to use names of people and places to tell his stories. In fact, in the first seven verses of our lesson tonight, he uses ten specific names: Emperor Augustus, Quirinius, Syria, Joseph, Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, David, and Mary. It seems as if Luke is trying to locate this story in time and space. If you look at Luke's other New Testament book, for example, the book of Acts, you might notice a list of nations in chapter 2. Throughout both Luke and Acts, our third evangelist captures the details of people and places. Perhaps Luke knows that good storytellers make better stories with real named people and real named places.

But tonight, we are not going to try and establish all the names and places about which Luke writes. Rather, we are going to reflect briefly about the powerful symbols that this night brings to our attention. Symbols help us live into the things that the symbols represent. For example, when we see an American flag, we do not see just a piece of cloth, but we see and feel the patriotism the flag represents. This is the nature of symbols—they are not something added to something else to explain it a different way. Instead, symbols fuse themselves to the things that they represent—like a handshake represents friendship, or communion represents feasting at God's banquet of celebration in God's kingdom.

One of my students wrote this several years ago and it makes a certain kind of sense as we think about how the light of Christ is a symbol of the coming of Jesus. Hear her words (Stacey Pitkium):

Several years ago, McDonalds came out with a new breakfast sandwich, the McGriddle. What was so great about the McGriddle? It is a breakfast sandwich made with two pancakes that had syrup diffused through the center. It was a good concept and, since McDonald's still carries them, they must have been popular.

Think for a moment about a regular pancake and syrup. The syrup and the pancake are two individual, completely separate items. They touch one another and the syrup might begin to seep into the pancake, but on the plate, syrup is still syrup and pancake is still pancake. When I decided to start making New Year and Christian resolutions to pray more or read my Bible, the resolutions became my life's syrup. The resolutions didn't change who I was or my relationship to God. Rather the resolutions simply added an agenda item to my calendar. Although they may have helped the way I looked at life and taught me a little more about God, they didn't change who I was at the core. In other words, the pancake remains a pancake.

Tonight, we try to fuse our symbols of Christmas with who we are and even who we want to become. Christmas has many robust symbols. The Christmas Tree is full of such symbols. The nativity scene on the altar accommodates another set of symbols by which we try to understand the story of the incarnation—when God became flesh and dwelt among us. Words like hope, expectation, love, and peace are also symbols that interpret the mystery and wonder of Christmas Eve. More than anything

else, however, there is one short verse of scripture that helps us understand what is going on here tonight. It is from the beginning of John's Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The light of Christ occasions our gathering here tonight. Lights are everywhere. All of the many church candles are, no doubt, making the Salado Fire Marshall a little jumpy tonight! But each candle represents a hope that each of us harbor that the world might someday be like the world God created for us. We expect in our best moments that God could realize the words like peace and hope in us. And God would do so in our specific time and in our little part of the world.

Christmas represents for all of us the hope that tonight we can dream an impossible, and perhaps improbable, dream. In this Christ child, God has promised the world what he first gave us long ago. In the silence of tonight there may appear a better tomorrow—for us all. May God bless us—every one! Amen.

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EXTRA CREDIT:

It can be difficult to remember in the midst of the holiday busyness that, like John the Baptist, God calls Christians to bear witness to the true light--Jesus. This true light will soon be shed abroad on everyone, but how will we recognize it when it begins to shine? Jesus let the true light shine through him in word and deed--healing the sick, preaching with authority, revealing God's graciousness--but many did not recognize him as the true light for their lives. And so it still is today. Thank goodness the true light and its power to enlighten everyone doesn't depend on our recognition of its appearing! The shining of the true light depends instead on the faithfulness of God, who never stops coming into the world to be its true light.

Almighty God, strengthen the true light of Christ that shines in me and help me bear witness to your faithfulness and love in the coming week. Open my eyes and ears to the presence of your light. Amen.