



Good Shepherd
Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI

“Light in the Darkness”

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“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5).

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GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Collect of the Day

O' God, You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

We invest a lot of energy in Christmas. We envision elegantly dressed people smiling lovingly at one another by the roaring fireplace, but it never happens that way, does it? Instead, Uncle Bob, having had a bit too much to drink, brings up a sensitive and taboo topic at the table, causing your mother-in-law to burst into tears and your sister-in-law who is a teetotaler to give you the stink eye.

One psychologist in Detroit encourages her clients to play a game of Dysfunctional Family Bingo (WSJ 12/11/12). Here's how it works. Choose an ally in the family and each of you creates a personalized bingo card, with each square representing some kind of annoying behavior that you just know will happen at the family gathering. For example, one square might be: "Mother-in-law criticizes your parenting." Another: "Aunt Betty locks herself in the bathroom and cries." A third: "Mouth breathing nephew never gets his nose out of the video games." Fill up the whole card and see which one of you gets to Bingo first. Couple of rules: first, don't tell anyone you're playing the game. That's bad form. Second, it's not fair to provoke the behaviors in order to win. You're simply an observer.

We strive for the perfect Christmas, but a lot can go wrong with Christmas and something usually does. At my former church in St. Louis, we hosted a live nativity scene. It was a big deal with, rehearsals, choirs, a real baby in a real manger surrounded by real barnyard animals. One year our infant Jesus was very unhappy at the beginning of the drama and by the

overcome his light. Even the darkness of death and the grave is scattered by the light of Christ.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” Dear friends, that is the Good News of Christmas Eve. That is the Good News of every day. Amen.

middle of it was screaming “bloody murder.” We had a contingency plan and quickly swapped out the unmanageable Jesus with one that was well fed and sleepy. Only trouble this new Jesus was already 7, 8 months old and so big his legs nearly hung over the edges of the manger. Another year, in the middle of the skit, one of our sheep decided to make a run for it, right down a residential street in St. Louis. A shepherd by the name of Frank Reichgert took off in hot pursuit. . . staff, robe, sandals and all, but it was clear Frank had not run after anything in a very long time and the flip flops were not helping. So young Joseph joined in the chase, leaving Mary and the wise men looking at each other, wondering what to do next.

A lot can go wrong with our Christmas celebrations, and something usually does. Christmas is a messy business. Maybe that’s just as well, because the original Christmas was anything but perfect.

First, there was the shame of an unplanned and untimely pregnancy. Joseph knows he’s not the father, and in that culture Mary could have been stoned. A little later, just when Mary reaches full term, then Caesar orders a census. They have to travel to Bethlehem which is about 80 miles away, more if they skirt around Samaria, which Jews usually did because of the hostility with Samaritans. So we’re talking four or five days, maybe more considering Mary’s condition. Once they arrive in Bethlehem, there is no kindly doorman in front of a nice hotel expecting their arrival. Nor is there a hospital with a maternity unit. What they find is a small town flooded with visitors who have also come to be counted. The only inn in town is filled to the gills, and so the innkeeper, seeing Mary’s condition and Joseph’s distress, offers the stable out back. At least there would be a roof over their heads and a little warmth generated by the animals.

Then the mess of labor and birth, water and blood and a baby’s first breath and cry, the man receiving the baby, wiping him off, checking him over,

praying all is right with the baby and with Mary, wrapping him in the bands of cloth, holding him, looking into his tiny face and gently handing him back to his mother.

The first Christmas was as messy as human life itself. But the claim this story makes is astonishing: Almighty God leaves heaven and enters into the same chaos and messiness and darkness that you and I know. He doesn't protect himself from the darkness of sin and evil and suffering, or even the darkness of death. He doesn't protect himself for the darkness. Out of love for us he enters into it.

Philosophers have always dismissed that as foolishness, and theologians also struggle to make sense of it. Poets and musicians can help. Benjamin Britton wrote a wonderful Christmas carol entitled "This Little Babe". I give you one line: "All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake." And I love how St. John introduces the story with a stunning assertion. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Christ was born into our world, a messy world, a world estranged from God, spiritually blind and ignorant, rebellious and dysfunctional . . . a world where we are also estranged from one another, where gunmen try to take out as many innocents as they can, at a Colorado theater, in an Oregon mall, at a Sikh temple just down the road in Oak Creek, a salon in Brookfield, and most recently, a primary school in Connecticut. Our world is capable of such evil, such inky, black darkness. Our country is groping for answers, but there are no easy ones, no sure fixes. We can change the gun laws but it's much harder to change the human heart. Besides, long before guns, King Herod ordered the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem, hoping that among tiny bodies would be the infant Jesus.

And please remember, the problem doesn't lie just out there. We are not merely victims of the sin and

dysfunction of others. Each of us has our own contributions to the darkness. Like an octopus squirting out a cloud of ink, each of us adds to the gloom not just with our own dysfunction, but with our own sin. We thumb our noses at God's commands, write them off as outdated and superstitious. In thought, word and deed, we do harm to innocents around us. The deep darkness isn't just out there. . . it's in the hearts and minds of each of us.

There are many kinds of darkness: the loss of someone dear to us; serious illness in one you love; anxiety about your children, the stability of your work.

There are many kinds of darkness. Fears about outliving your savings. Fears for our nation, our future, our world. Fears about death and dying. Fears about the coming judgment. There are many kinds of darkness.

And the message of Christmas is that we are not alone in the darkness, not hemmed in by the darkness, whatever kind it is, because the light has come. Christ was born in Bethlehem. The light has shown in the darkness, and the darkness threw everything it had at the light beginning with Herod, continuing with the temptations of the evil one, ending with the cross. The darkness hates the light, and at Calvary, it appeared the darkness won the day and overcame the light. Jesus was dead, as dead as dead can be, and the day turned into night. But on the third day came the bright light of Easter dawn. "The light shines in the darkness, and though it tried, the darkness has not overcome it."

It means God is alongside you, there with you in the darkest place of your darkest night. It means there is light for and me, for us all, and an invitation to live out our lives in that light, to trust that that light will not suddenly depart, or unexpectedly go out and leave you in utter darkness, to trust that God came in that baby and continues to come into your life and mine, so that we can live in that love, live in that forgiveness, and live in that light. There is no darkness so dark that it can