

Tracy Daub
12/24/20—University Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-5, 14

CHRIST IN THE DARK

Thank God for Christmas! After this disastrously terrible year, we need a dose of happiness and good cheer. For that *is* how Christmas is generally regarded: as the season of happiness. During this past summer, I recall hearing about how some people were so tired of Covid-19 restrictions that they decided to decorate their homes with Christmas lights in July and August an effort to claim the happiness found in Christmas.

But the origins of Christmas are not found in happiness or good cheer. The origins of Christmas are found in the dark.

Notice how much darkness features in all the Christmas readings from the Bible. In Luke we hear about the angel of the Lord announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the fields. Remember the time of day it was? It was at night. In the darkness of the night, the angel appears to the shepherds with this good news.

In Matthew's gospel, we hear about the wise men journeying to find the child. But in order to find the child, they must follow a brightly shining star—a star which can only be seen at night, when it is dark.

John's gospel talks about Jesus being the Word, who was with God at the beginning of all things, who in fact *was* God, and who was the light of all people. And then John adds, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Centuries *before* Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah encouraged his people with hopeful words about the coming of God's special person who would reverse their situation of oppression

and hardship. Isaiah stated that, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” And he went on to speak about the coming of a child who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace and who would liberate his people with justice and righteousness. Early Christians recalled these words from Isaiah and thought to themselves, “that sounds just like Jesus!” They understood Jesus as the One who joined them in their darkness and who led them out of darkness to the light of God’s love and liberation.

Christmas begins in the dark. Christmas begins where there is suffering, where there is loneliness, where there is fear. Christmas begins where there is heartache, where there is shame, where there is injustice. The first Christmas came to impoverished people living under cruel circumstances. The first Christmas came to a poor couple forced to take a hard journey for a census so the Roman Empire could enrich itself by squeezing out more taxes from these destitute people. The first Christmas came to people living in darkness, under brutal conditions, to those enduring great suffering.

And into the darkness, God was born. Through the birth of Jesus, God joined humanity in the dark. That is what we call the *incarnation* and it is the essence of the Christmas story: that God became flesh and lived among us.

In her poem, *Incarnation*, Sarah Klassen writes:

God is carnal? Yes! God
has got to be flesh and blood. Bones too
like any one of us. A child
can’t go to sleep in a dark room
unless someone is right there beside her.
Someone with some skin.

Christmas is when we celebrate that God took on skin and joined us in the dark. God joined us so that we would not be alone in the dark. And God joined us to lead us out of the dark. As Jesus grew up and carried out his ministry, he confronted not only the dark circumstances of oppression and injustice that held people in captivity, he also addressed the internal conditions of the human heart and mind that darken our lives—our shame, our unhealthy behaviors, our fears, our anger, our greed, our resentment, our selfishness. And standing with us in our darkness, he pointed the way to the light.

This is why we celebrate Christmas even if we are not happy people at Christmas time. Happiness is a temporary emotion. Happiness depends upon having just the right conditions in our lives. But joy, joy is something different. Joy is greater than happiness. The Bible passages we read tonight never talk about happiness, but they do talk about joy. They talk about rejoicing in what God is doing for all of us who dwell in darkness. You and I cannot be happy living in the dark circumstances of our lives. But we *can* know joy. We can rejoice in the gift of God's love for us. We can know joy that nothing will ever stop God from loving us or being with us. And we can know joy in a God who overcomes darkness with the light of love and liberation.

In order to appreciate the joy of Christmas, we have to first appreciate the darkness of this world and of our souls. We have to first appreciate our great *need* for God to help us with the darkness. And then, we will understand the joy.

You *can* celebrate Christmas without going through the dark, but *Christ* won't be there.