

**Sermon - Christmas Day 2023**  
**12/24/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past winter, the Ukrainian artist Irenaeus Yurchuk painted a picture of the Holy Family. In his painting is Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus - the three of them, as always, huddled close together at the scene of the blessed nativity. But this nativity scene is not an ordinary or expected version of this sort of painting. It is far from the first century stables or caves or clay dwelling places of Bethlehem. This nativity is set in Ukraine. In 2023. In the middle of a very present, very contemporary war.

Perhaps 80% of the painting is filled with destruction. Bold blacks and grays compose the background of two buildings, bombed out and crumbling, and the breadth of the image is filled with the broken rubble that has fallen from them. But in the center of the painting, there is a window of bright, pre-dawn sky. A star shines from the midst of the blue, illuminating the broken beams and bombed out concrete. And below the rubble, in a little cave hollowed out from the mess, we find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, drawn near to one another with the child Jesus resting gently upon his mother's lap. The air is black in the little cave of wreckage, but it is not quite clear whether the points of light behind them are just more dust or the unlikely perseverance of stars. For a painting of the horrors of war, it is suffused with light.

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. THose who lived in a land of deep darkness, upon them a light has shined.* This light prophesied by Isaiah is the same light that St. John heralds when he writes in his Gospel: "The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." It is bold enough to think of a light that no darkness could overcome, but there is a poetic audacity to imagine a light so vibrant, so utterly *other* that to any darkness that might come around it would appear not only fierce and enduring, but absolutely

incomprehensible. Light that is so different from the darkness that the battle has already ended before it could begin. Light so clear and pure that darkness would not merely pull out its weapons and prepare itself for war, but instead be so absolutely overcome that it would forget about the possibility of war in the first place. It would be incomprehensible.

This is the light that plays in the shadows of the nativity painting by Irenaeus Yurchuk. This is the light of Christmas. It is the unutterable brightness of the Word who has always been and will always be God, full of grace and truth.

It is such a strange and ridiculous thing sometimes to have faith, or to even want to have faith. Christmas seems to distill the absurdity and hold it out before us like a challenge. Where is your Savior in the rubble? Where is your Savior in the prison cell? Where is He on the sidewalk on the coldest night of the year? Where is he in the grief that shakes us awake? The violence we cannot stop? The burden we cannot hold between our own lonely shoulder? Where is the brightness now?

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.* He is in a manger. He is born this night in Bethlehem, the city of David, the Word made flesh come into a world made new. He is the light, gleaming with power and against all reason, illuminating the need of all creation and holding us fast within the heart of God.

Christmas can seem incomprehensible. In a pageant I once directed with a group of small children, God decides to do something about the horrors of the world that he loves so much, and a little band of angels offer helpful advice. “Ah, yes, sending someone is a good idea, Lord. Send someone strong. Send someone powerful. Send someone royal.” God, of course, offers a series of suggestions that seem to the little pageant angels to be increasingly absurd: “sending a baby? To a peasant girl? To be born in a stable? Full of poop?” (the kids always love that part). And the

littlest angel is the one of greatest wisdom as he responds to God: “Brilliant, they won’t be expecting *that!*”

We weren’t expecting the miracle of the Nativity. We never could have imagined the Incarnation – where God of all creation loved each of us so much that he sent his own Son to be born among us. Sometimes this light is still incomprehensible to us, because it is so simple, so delicate, so good. We were not expecting that a small baby, who could not even hold up his little baby head without the strong hand of his mother, would become the Head of the Church and the Author of our salvation. And yet this is the radical blessing of our faith. Here, in this child, is the Messiah, the One who saves. And here, in the manger is our *hope*.

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* It is true that 80% of the world - perhaps even more - might appear sometimes to be buried in rubble. It is true that 80% - perhaps even more - of our own hearts might feel like scenes of destruction, even warfare, against the worst of what we know can grasp human beings by the throat and shake us from our sense of dignity. It is true that we may be under the ruin, clothed in weakness and shades of gray. But it is true that here, too, is incomprehensible light. It is true that our hope is here: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born this day and forever to be our Savior.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*