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Abington Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2018 Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-14

## FOR

On this date, 21 years ago, something wonderful happened for our family. The plan had been for the baby to come sometime after Christmas. The expected delivery date was January 1. But soon after we tucked into bed our 20-month-old daughter on the evening of December 23, Nancy's labor began. We alerted my brother who lived 40 minutes away that we might need for him to come at some point to watch over our daughter so we could go to the hospital. Neither Nancy nor I got any sleep that night and finally, around 4 a.m. we decided it was time to call my brother to come. He pulled into our driveway in about 30 minutes.

I definitely did not want to miss out on being with Nancy throughout her labor nor was I going to miss the arrival of our second child. So, I had lined up a substitute preacher for the Christmas Eve service – just in case. Nancy's contractions were not really advancing much by nine a.m., and her labor with number one had been long and drawn out, so I called my substitute and told her she probably needed to be ready to lead the worship service that night. But then things began to speed up, and before noon, I got to witness the great miracle of our son's birth. I realize it was a very different experience for Nancy than it was for me, but to get to witness the births of our two children are among the most amazing, holy experiences of my life.

Nancy and Baby Jordan were doing just fine. They were being well-cared for. I hadn't had any sleep, but I was so pumped with joy that I called back my substitute preacher and told her I was fine to do the worship service. I got to the church well-ahead of time and hid out in my office. I didn't want to see anyone before the service because I didn't want to have to answer any questions about how my pregnant wife was doing. As the Christmas preludes were playing, I walked to the front of the sanctuary, and when it came time to welcome the congregation to the Christmas Eve service, I got to quote Isaiah 9:6 saying, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us, and I'm not talking about Jesus." The church members all

started looking around wondering where Nancy was. I then gave them the name, the time of birth and the weight, and told them, “Now, for the rest of the evening, we are going to be talking about Jesus.”

I don't have any news quite like that for you this evening. It is a most joyful night, and yet, stark contrasts frame it. At the same time we have been journeying toward beauty and wonder, there are some who carry painful memories that grip their hearts this time of year. Many are thrown into this 'family' holiday all by themselves and others are caught in the painful brokenness of their family. There have been and are many expressions of merriment, but this can be a time of serious depression for many, who still find themselves low even after purchases of a mountain of stuff, even after many glasses of good cheer.

This evening, we celebrate a joyful story of a birth, and yet... During World War II, a young Norwegian soldier came home to find out that his mother and father had both been killed. For the first time he faced a Christmas Eve where he was utterly alone. With great sadness, he went out that night and stood by the edge of a Norwegian fjord. In mourning he shouted into the sky the angels' song: “Glory to God in the highest,” and the fjord echoed back, “highest – highest – highest.” “And on earth, peace.” “Peace – peace – peace.” He sat down and cried. Peace for him was nothing more than a fading echo in the dark. <sup>1</sup>

Our Isaiah passage we heard started in darkness. “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.” Frankly, these words don't quite say what I want them to. Why can't Isaiah declare that when the light comes into the world it absolutely obliterates the darkness? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the light that comes scooped up every measure of sadness, every ounce of despair, heaped together every raw deal, every horrendous tragedy, every evil plan, every god-awful, life-sucking disease, and tossed the whole mess into the cosmic trash bin! I want the light to arrive and to win, and I want it to win totally. However, even once the light comes as described in Isaiah, not all of the darkness is gone.

I heard of a Bible study done on this Isaiah passage, where the leader took the group into a room that had no windows, sat them down and said, “You are people who live

in a land of deep darkness.” And she turned out the lights. A few people gasped because there wasn’t a single stray photon bouncing around that could make an impression on a human retina. It was totally dark. It got quiet. In the hush and in the dark, they sat and waited. After five minutes, five surprisingly long, silent, and absolutely dark minutes, these words were shared, “Those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined.” With those words a match was struck and a small candle was lit. By no means did that small candle fill the room with light, but all the same it changed things - changed them radically. With the flickering of the light, people saw themselves, and they saw each other. They saw faces - surprised faces, puzzled faces, and even a couple of faces streaked with tears. They saw light reflecting in one another’s eyes. For those in deep darkness, a little light made all the difference.

This night we celebrate the meaning of the word ‘Immanuel’ which means ‘God is with us.’ God enters into the darkness to be with us. God refuses to dwell in the heavens above watching the drama of human life from a safe distance. Instead, God climbs right into the darkest places to be with us. God’s presence shared through the preposition ‘with’ is strengthened by the preposition ‘for.’ Isaiah identifies the coming of the light with the birth of a child. But it is the purpose of the child’s birth that is most enlightening. “For a child has been born **for** us...” The child who comes is named, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” and that is the child who comes for us. We’re not left out in utter darkness.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that it was nighttime when shepherds near Bethlehem received an unexpected visitor who told them of the birth of a child over in the town. I’m quite sure they did not fully understand the significance of the event, which means they were still somewhat in the dark even after the angel enlightened them about what was going on. There is that same preposition in Luke’s description of the angelic message to the shepherds: “I am bringing you good news of great joy **for** all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Our Lord comes for us and for all people. In that luminous action, we find reason to hope and to act.

I don't know if it was inspired by a real five year-old, but John Shea wrote the following piece called "Sharon's Christmas Prayer":

*She was five,  
sure of the facts,  
and recited them  
with slow solemnity,  
convinced every word  
was revelation.*

*She said*

*they were so poor  
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat  
and they went a long way from home  
without getting lost. The lady rode  
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby  
was inside the lady.  
They had to stay in a stable...*

*Shepherds came and you could  
pet the sheep but not feed them.  
Then the baby was borned.  
And do you know who he was?*

*Her quarter eyes inflated  
to silver dollars.*

*The baby was God.*

*And she jumped in the air,  
whirled around, dove into the sofa,  
and buried her head under the cushion  
which is the only proper response  
to the Good News of the Incarnation. <sup>2</sup>*

I think little Sharon understood at a five year-old level that a baby who was God had come for her benefit. I'm not suggesting that the only proper response for us is to jump in the air, whirl around and dive into a pew, but the baby who comes for us

enables us to whirl around and dive into life with an assurance that God's coming presence is for our benefit and for the luminous benefit of all people. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us, and I'm talking about Jesus." He comes! He comes for us and for all people!

We can reflect the light of Christ by being with others when they are going through dark times. For the God of light comes for all people, and the darkness will never be the same. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace. The echo reverberates now and forevermore.

<sup>1</sup> From a sermon, "Christmas Eve Peace," by Edward Markquart, Grace Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington.

<sup>2</sup> From *The God Who Fell from Heaven / The Hour of the Unexpected*, by John Shea, Thomas More Press, 1992.