



Christmas



LIGHT

St. Paul's Anglican, Advent Devotional

2024

Christmas Light

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Published by St. Paul's Anglican Church

Acknowledgments

To my Editor, **Dawn Schaeperkoetter**, thank you for your input and the many hours and days spent editing these twenty-four devotions. This devotional would not have been possible without you.

Introduction

“May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”

—J.R.R. Tolkien

If you have read or seen Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, you may remember the part when after Galadriel has given gifts to almost all of the fellowship, she then turns to Frodo, the Ring-bearer. She gives him a small crystal vial that glitters with rays of white light that spring from her hand. The vial, she tells him, “will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.” Frodo had no idea how dark the journey would become as he and Sam Gamgee would battle the darkness together.

We need plenty of Sam Gamgees in our lives to battle the darkness together. But let me be frank with you—before you find a companion in the darkness, you must find something with which to battle the darkness: a light in dark places when all other lights go out. His name is Jesus. He is the Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the Messiah, the Lamb of God, Immanuel. In Him was life, and the life, His life—the life that He lived here on this globe—was the light of every human who has lived, is living, or will ever live. His light shines in the darkest of places, and the darkness will not overcome it (John 1:4-5).

The purpose of this devotional is three-fold. First, to help us see the radiance of God’s glory in the face of Jesus—to see Him, to behold Him, to worship Him as the light of the world. After all, Advent is not just a season of great anticipation, or wonder, but a season of light bursting forth through darkness. We tangibly see this in windows in our neighborhoods. We see it strung from every branch of a tree, lighting up our homes, and adorning our Christmas trees. We see it on Christmas Eve as we gather together in darkened churches, candles in hand, and sing, “Away in a Manger.” This Advent, bask in the glow of God’s glory in the life of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. See Him as the light of the world.

Secondly, it’s to help us to know that quite literally we are lost without light. Try taking a back-country camping trip and put together a tent in the dark. Or, while driving at night, turn your headlights off. Actually, no don’t try that—just take my word for it! To say that light is important is to state the

obvious. But, sometimes the obvious becomes profound when forced to contend with their absence. My task is to help us see our “lostness,” and yet, how God’s light in Jesus has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Finally, it’s where we began—we need a light in dark places, especially when all other lights go out. We live in a very fallen world. That’s it, plain and simple. Sin and all its ugliness has tainted our world pervasively. It frustrates, it disrupts peace, it disrupts comfort, and ultimately it leads to separation and death. And, in this fallen world there is an enemy—he is the opponent to all that is good, and true, and right, and beautiful. Satan divides, and tempts, and lies, and destroys. He is so cunning in his ways—so much that we see wrong and can deem it right. We are seduced into thinking less is more. But, thanks be to God, there is One who has overcome the darkness. He, Jesus, is our light in dark places, especially when all other lights go out.

Therefore, our prayer is that through these twenty-four devotions you would see, and feel, and know that God has gifted us the light of the world in the glory of His Son, Jesus Christ. A light that saves. A light for us in dark places, especially when all other lights go out.

Using the Devotional

The devotional is broken down into four weeks, with each week having its own direction. The aim for each week finds its meaning in Jesus being the Light of Christmas. Although our focus will not be the four primary themes of Advent—Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love—our hope is that the Advent wreath will still be an integral part of your worship during this season.

Week 1 *The Light*

Week 2 *Light Has Overcome the Darkness*

Week 3 *Light Has Come to Rescue Us in the Darkness*

Week 4 *Celebrating the Light of Christmas*

The Advent Wreath

One of the many purposes of the Advent wreath is the lighting of five candles. This weekly anticipation builds as the wreath gets brighter and brighter until finally on Christmas Eve the Christ candle is lit, signifying that Jesus is the light of the world.

The Advent wreath has been in use for centuries in the Christian church. The concept of the wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th century. The practice would eventually spread to England and beyond.

The many different materials of the wreath are rich with symbolism. Some are obvious and others more obscure.

- The wreath is circular, representing God's infinite love.
- The base is constructed from:
 - Evergreens, representing the hope of eternal life brought by Jesus Christ.
 - Holly, representing the crown of thorns
 - Boxwood and Fir, representing signs of the everlasting quality of God
 - Straw, representing the nativity of our Lord
 - Pomanders (apples studded with cloves), representing original sin, death, and burial of Jesus.
 - Orange peels, representing the bitter gall of the Crucifixion.
 - English Ivy & Heather, representing our shared communion with other Anglicans throughout the world.
 - Grapevine & wheat, representing symbols of the Holy Eucharist.
 - Pine cones & pomegranates, representing the resurrection
- The base construction, along with the four candles of each week of Advent, surrounds the Christ Candle in the center, which represents Jesus as the light of the world.

A Word to Parents

Advent is an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on the birth of Jesus. That's especially true for families because of the pace of life. Our prayer is that before the calendar gets too full, set aside each Sunday to come

together. To help toward that end, we have provided Sundays in the devotional to gather the family. It includes the lighting of the Advent wreath, the devotion of the day, and evening prayer. Everything is there to make it simple and easy to gather and worship as a family. *Use what you want, but above all spend time together.* More now than ever we need to continually teach our children that there is a light that has overcome the darkness of our world. His name is Jesus.

Week 1

The Light

Sunday, December 1

Lighting of the 1st Advent Candle

The first candle, which is purple, symbolizes hope. Have one member of the family light the first candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace,

there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:3-5

Light & Rest

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Genesis 1:3-5

Consider for a moment what life would be like without light. What if God said in the beginning, “Let there be darkness”? We read that there was darkness in Genesis 1:2, but what if God kept it that way? What if there was no verse three? Some would find life to be very difficult, and in many respects that would be true. Take for example, Tromsø, Norway, where the “Polar Night” lasts all winter. Yes, all winter! Tromsø is located 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, which means that from November to January, the sun doesn’t rise at all. Think about it—no sun. No beautiful walk on a beach or into an open field to watch a beautiful sunrise. Most people’s response to this is, “I could never live there” or “how depressing.”

Thankfully we live in a day and age whereby even if the sun does not come up, we don’t have to live in complete darkness. This is so because in 1879 the modern world changed forever with a patent. It entailed an invention of a carbon filament made of cotton and line thread, wood splints, and papers coiled in various ways. After some fine tuning, a company evolved that was dedicated to the production of the electric light bulb. The company, Edison Electric Company, offered customers a safer, cleaner, cheaper alternative to gas light.

It was Edison’s equivalent of “let there be light” because for the first time in human history, work was no longer limited to the time between sunrise and sunset. Therefore, it was an invitation to humanity to now live in a world that never sleeps. In fact, Edison himself believed that sleep was a waste of time. Ironically, his vision for a sleepless humanity has come to pass.

Sleep deprivation, especially among our young people, is at an all-time high.

But know this, that the divine creator who uttered, “Let there be light” also benevolently declares “let there be rest.” On His Sabbath we see that God no longer performed the labor of the preceding six days in which He created all things by His word (Genesis 2:1-3). We, by the God of rest, are commanded to follow His pattern—*rest from the ordinary*. Our God of light is also the God who gives us the Sabbath out of love—there is always more to do. I always try to remember the quote from Will Willimon, who back in 2013 stated, “Sabbath is a publicly enacted sign of our *trust* that God keeps the world; therefore, we don’t have to.”

This Advent (especially Advent), by the power of the Holy Spirit, enact tremendous levels of trust in God. He keeps the world; therefore, I encourage you (at some point in your week) to involve yourself in regular practices that are designed to reorient your life back toward the Lord with regular times of *rest, reading Scripture, prayer*, and adding these optional measures:

- Limiting devices: no social media, texting, or email for 24 hours.
- Date night with your spouse.
- Saturday or Sunday morning fun breakfast with the family.
- Time in nature
- Times alone in solitude

One of the most important things you could possibly do to live a blessed life, to have life in the fullness Jesus promised, looks like the opposite of doing something. Our God of light says, “Rest.”

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I

believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;

And grant us your salvation.

O Lord, guide those who govern us;

And lead us in the way of justice and truth.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness;

And let your people sing with joy.

O Lord, save your people;

And bless your inheritance.

Give peace in our time, O Lord;

And defend us by your mighty power.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;

Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God, you manifest in your servants the signs of your presence: Send forth upon us the Spirit of love, that in companionship with one another your abounding grace may increase among us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 2

Scripture Reading: Psalm 36:7-9

What is Light?

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your *light* do we see *light*.

Psalm 36:7-9

If you were asked to define light, where would you begin? We might think we know what light is until we're forced to define it. What we discover is that it is not simple. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines light as the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible.¹ Scientifically, we could articulate that it is the electromagnetic radiance of the sun. Nonetheless, what you slowly but surely begin to see is that the deeper science delves into the nature of light, the more complexity it discovers.

What about divine light? David says, "In your light do we see light." As we'll see later on in this devotional, the book of Revelation helps us here. We read,

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Revelation 21:23

Again we're hard pressed to articulate it or define it, but we could say that divine light is the very radiance of God's glory. One author defines it and

¹ Google's English dictionary is provided by Oxford Languages.

takes us a little deeper by saying, “The light of God’s glory is the radiance of ‘infinite beauty and greatness of God’s manifold perfections.’”²

On top of that we know the importance of what light does for us, both natural and divine. We don’t need a candle or a flashlight to see the sun; we see it by its own radiance. In the same way we never see Jesus or divine light by the light of self, but self in the light of Jesus. This is what David has for us—this is his worship when he says, “In your light do we see light.” Darkened foolish hearts blinded by the god of this world don’t suddenly see the radiance of God’s beauty. We think we know where we are and where we’re going, but we don’t. We think we can see, but we can’t. Jesus said, “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt. 6:23). Therein lies the problem with our own darkness: it masquerades as light. The light in you is darkness, and in this “light,” you don’t see light.

Therefore, we need to see the light of Christ. Not the light of the sun, or the light of a candle; there is no need of them, but in only the light of God Himself. This whole life of glory—all of it flows from Him as the sole and original fountain of light. In His light do we see light. His light always shows us the way to go (Psalm 119:105). His light has made our hearts glow with a new nature—a new life (2 Corinthians 4:6). Jesus incarnated, born into our world, is the radiance of God’s glory. This Advent, behold the Sun of Righteousness in His brightness and glory. It is this glorious light that we would do well to consider more than just a season—consider to admire, admire to love, love to desire, desire to seek, and finding to enjoy forever. As we proclaim gloriously on Sundays, that one day He will bring us with all of the saints into the joy of His heavenly kingdom, where we shall see Him face to face.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way

² John Piper quoted by Jon Bloom in his article entitled, “The Light We Need to See”

of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 3

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-5

Look For the Light

'Tis the season when mailboxes start filling up with cards, many of them photo cards. In recent years I have run across websites completely dedicated to showcasing the bedlam dedicated to snapping that, shall we say, Christmas-y (that is a word) moment. Rarely do we actually see it in the picture, but don't be deceived how much work it takes to orchestrate a perfect Christmas picture. It may be the family pet running out of frame, or the baby completely uncooperative, the teenager that is bored out of their mind. We parents know that the entire process is fraught with dangers and chaos. There truly is a story behind every picture.

Perhaps this will give you comfort knowing that the first Christmas was marred in chaos, darkness, a politically tense, and complex world. Racial tensions divided the world. There were those who had a lot and those who had very little. There was abuse of power, and political figures of the day were totally corrupt.

Our world is not much different than the world into which Jesus came. Darkness? Yes. Political divides, corruption, abuse of power? Yes. Is our culture filled with haves and have nots? Absolutely. But, here is the question: has our world always been bad? According to John, the answer is yes. Here his words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5

Christmas is the story of light coming into a very darkened world. The story itself that we read every year takes place in the dark at night. Shepherds watching their flocks at night. God appearing in dreams at night. Joseph and Mary finding closed doors at night. But yet, we gather to talk about the light. Can you see the light? Look for the light!

Don't be surprised when life begins to fall apart. Such as when Christmas pictures don't quite turn out as perfectly as we envisioned. God does not promise an easy life—a picture-perfect life. Life will always be hard; people you love will struggle, you will struggle, and there will be darkness and chaos.

But take comfort that the light has won. “The light shines in the darkness [your darkness], and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). In the messiness of life and the seemingly unraveling of it, Christ has won, and in His victory do we find hope and life. This is why Horatio Spafford, after losing his four daughters at sea, could put pen to paper and write the great hymns “It Is Well With My Soul” and “When Peace Like a River.” Darkness does not have the final word. God, at the right nanosecond, sent Jesus into our world as the great light that shines in our darkness. This Advent, I plead with you to see the light!

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 4

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:105

The Value of Knowing the Scoop (or Light)

Josh Billings, a 19th-century humorist, wrote that it is better “not to know so much than to know so many things that ain’t so.”

Jamie O’Neill, a college professor, put this to the test after he became concerned about the lack of knowledge among so many of his students. It wasn’t that he was concerned about their lack of technical knowledge or complex facts, but that so many of the general “facts” they thought they knew were just “ain’t so.”

So one day he decided to do something about it. Hoping to demonstrate to his students just how lacking they were in the basics—not simply to expose or take pot shots at their ignorance, but to help them see that they had a problem and they could not hide it any longer. He devised an eighty-six question quiz on general knowledge. He gave it to his college English class, twenty-six students ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-four, all of whom had completed at least one quarter of college work.

He was astounded and startled by what he discovered. Here’s a sampling of what he found that “ain’t so.”

Ralph Nader is a baseball player. Charles Darwin invented gravity. Christ was born in the 16th century. J. Edgar Hoover was a 19th century president. Sid Caesar was an early Roman emperor. Mark Twain invented the cotton gin. Benito Mussolini was a Russian leader of the 18th century. Dwight D. Eisenhower came earlier, serving as president during the 17th century. Socrates was an American Indian chieftain.³

³ Jamie O’Neil, “No Allusions in the Classroom,” *Newsweek*, September 23, 1985.

His students were just as creative in their understanding of geography. He adds:

They knew that Managua is the capital of Vietnam, that Cape Town is in the United States, and that Beirut is in Germany. Camp David is in Israel. Cologne is in the Virgin Islands. Belfast was variously located in Egypt, Germany, Belgium, and Italy. Leningrad was transported to Jamaica; Montreal to Spain.

And on and on it went—perhaps Billings is right. Before Josh Billings, God stated something similar through the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, *that he understands and knows me*, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”

Jeremiah 9:23-24

There is a premium on knowing the scoop. The scoop, according to Jeremiah: knowing God. Knowing and understanding God should be our major pursuit in life, and we pursue it through the words that God gave us. This is why David, in the 119th Psalm, equates the Word of God as a “lamp” and “light” to our path.

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Psalms 119:105

David, a man after God’s own heart, a man of good wit and natural understanding, gives to God the glory of his wisdom. David owns up to the fact that his best light was but darkness when he was not lightened and ruled by the words of God.

John the disciple, as we saw yesterday, equates the Word as God, or the Word as Christ Himself, when he said, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Again,

Jesus Himself is the light of the Sun of Righteousness giving brightness to all things including our paths. He, the Word of God, was a light to Peter when the angel stood by him in the prison, and the light shined about him. He was a light to Paul when the light from heaven shined round about him, and he heard Christ speak. And Christ is truly a lamp to us as He shines through this clay, as He shines through the potter's vessel. Christ is our treasure which we bear in earthen vessels.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us boast in knowing and understanding God. C.H. Spurgeon said, "We are walkers through the city of this world, and we are often called to out into its darkness; let us never venture there without the light-giving word, lest we slip with our feet".⁴

There is value in knowing the scoop—or light.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that, guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, (Hendrickson Publishing, 1876, volume 3), p. 342.

Thursday, December 5

Scripture Reading: Malachi 4:1-2

The Light Shining On Everything

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

Malachi 4:1-2

Have you ever missed the obvious? Have you ever been looking for your car keys, and they have been in your hand the whole time? Or, you spend five minutes looking for your phone, and it's been in your pocket the whole time?

Or, what about missing the obvious because of familiarity? I know that when my father was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, one of the things that I remember him saying was "you never think about breathing until you can't." It's true, isn't it? From the air that we breathe to the ground under our feet, we never give them a thought, but when you think about them, they are huge. Like the true significance of the birth of Jesus Christ. There are undisputed historical effects of the birth of Jesus Christ that are so important that we miss them.

Think about the effect that Jesus has had on the world in the sheer number of followers. According to statistics, there are approximately 2.4 billion humans who call themselves Christ-followers, which is about 30% of the world's population. Statistics aside, what is undisputed is how the life of one man has influenced more people over the course of human history than any other.

Think about the effect that Jesus has had on our calendars. Virtually every person in the world would call this year 2024. Why? Because Jesus Christ was born 2,024 years ago. No other man in history has been saddled with the universal honor of dividing history in half so that even those who do not honor him would bear daily witness by the year in which they say they live.

And yet, the indifference to Jesus in the day and age in which we live is striking. His birth and His coming into this world through the first advent have profoundly affected our world, and yet more than ever the world around us has rejected him.

Prophets are not easy going people—never have been, never will be. They are notorious for making us uncomfortable but never fail to make us think. Usually like today they have a stunning proclamation to make about those who are around them. The problem with God’s people in Malachi’s day and age was the idea that belief in Yahweh was a waste of time. Evil people prosper and we suffer. It’s not fair. Do you hear it? What effect does God have on our world? He doesn’t seem to make any difference or have any effect in our world.

Malachi calls them back. The sun of righteousness was rising. And he has been rising all over this world ever since. And one day His rise will reach noonday brightness when He appears in glory and the final division between the indifferent and rebellious and those who believe will be made.

All of it is contained in verse two:

But for you who fear my name, **the sun of righteousness shall rise**

- A rising sun

Jesus Christ is a rising sun. As we have seen this week, He brings light where there is darkness. Jesus helps us see things as they really are.

- Beams of righteousness

Jesus Christ makes things right. He is the bridge of reconciliation for man with God. It is His gracious sacrifice on the cross of Calvary that clothes us

in His righteousness. But what do we do about the injustices of our world, or the suffering of the innocent, or the prospering of the wicked? Jesus gives His answer—where I am trusted, I will reconcile and restore. Where I am not, I will have the last word of judgment.

with healing in its wings.

- Wings of healing

Ultimately, in the resurrection of Christ, all diseases, pains, sufferings, and sorrow and crying will cease. Malachi's cry to his people is the same cry today—there is hope in Jesus.

Charles Wesley has done well to set this text to music in, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." It's the natural effect of the season, isn't it?

Hail the heav'n born Prince of peace,
Hail the Sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Ris'n with healing in his wings.

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Friday, December 6

Scripture Reading: Psalm 27:1

There's Nothing To Be Afraid Of

In raising four children, let me say, it wasn't always easy to get them to go to bed at night. To be completely transparent, it wasn't easy for me when I was little. I was a very fearful little soul—profoundly scared of darkness to the point that I could almost imagine anything in my closet or under my bed.

Our children would often have bad dreams when they would wake up in the night and come into our bedroom and stand quietly next to our bed, typically on my side where they find considerably more sympathy. Can any parents relate? It was quite eerie—just standing there like an apparition until one or both of us awoke to hear the words we have all heard a thousand times, “I'm afraid.”

David, the writer of our Psalm today, knew a thing or two about what it meant to be afraid. He was fleeing for his life from King Saul, and yet in his fleeing he went over to the enemies of Israel, the Philistines (1 Samuel 21:10). The floods of ungodly men made him afraid. Undoubtedly, as a shepherd, we know there had to be fear as he walked through the valley—the place of scarcity, danger, pain, and the unknown. And yet time and time again we see David placing his life and fears in the hands of the Great Shepherd. This is uncharted territory for the sheep, but not for the shepherd. David will fear no evil because he knows God is with him (Ps. 23:4). David will go on to say, “I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears” (Psalm 34:4).

In our Psalm today he says,

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalm 27:1

When darkness falls and the children of God get scared, one can almost hear the default answer from David here in Psalm twenty-seven: “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” What we learn as we grow older in this world is that there is much to fear. But David’s point is that faith lives and thrives in the midst of our fears. It is the same faith that when trials come, they will prove invincible because we rely on the power of God. Hence, the real beauty of this verse is that the power of God in our darkness and in our fears is His light. It is not so much that God is placing physical light in your darkened world. David isn’t promising that God will provide a flashlight just in the nick of time. God’s light is truth when your fears turn on your brain to play tricks on you. Wouldn’t you agree, especially when you were little, it wasn’t just being left alone in a pitch-black room that was scary? It was that in that dark room nothing was discernible with your eyes, sounds were strangely magnified, hinges or old wood floors creaked, or it was soft unseen footsteps somewhere out there that triggered fear. All the while your brain begins to run on overload. This game that our mind plays with us doesn’t end at a certain age, does it?

What does change is our faith. As we walk with the God of our salvation, He brings light to life. He steadies our thoughts, our imaginations, our dreams, and our fears. We continue to have fear, but as God brings light to our life, we begin to say with David, “Whom shall I fear?” We have God; therefore, there’s nothing to be afraid of.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 7

Scripture Reading: John 8:12

Christmas Light For the Lost

We are eighteen days away from Christmas! Are you ready? How's your Christmas spirit? It's early, but there is no doubt our schedules and our time are on a collision course of sorts. In all the Christmas spirit we often find ourselves lost.

There was a father and a son taking a journey into the outback one day. The father was a skilled outdoorsman; his son was learning. He thought he would test his young son on his whereabouts by asking him some questions. As they were walking along, they stopped for a moment, and he asked, "Do you know where we are?" His son looked up at his father and said, "Nope!"

The father asked, "Do you know which way we were going?" His son looked up at him and said, "Nope!" The father chuckled and said, "Well I guess you're lost then." The son looked up at his father and said, "Nope, I'm not lost—I'm with you."

Jesus is about to illustrate this visually in John, chapter eight. In our life there will be times whereby we feel completely lost. God is the father—we are the little boy. We learn that when Jesus is with us, we're never lost.

Jesus shows his audience this because he begins to carry the Tabernacle theme from chapter seven into chapter eight. If you glance back into chapter seven (vv. 37-39), Jesus claims on the last day of the festival that He is the source of living water that the festival promised. Just as He has all along on the Sabbath (chapter 5) and Passover (chapter 6), so here He takes up images from the Jewish celebration and uses them in order to make clearer His identity as the Messiah and God's Son.

The setting is in the temple treasury (8:20) located within the Court of the Women. Here, in this part of the temple during the festival of Tabernacles, a lighting ceremony would have taken place. Four large stands each held four golden bowls, and these bowls would have been filled with oil and used the clothing of the day for wicks. When they were lit at night, all Jerusalem was illumined. Feel this and know this, that in a world that did not have public lighting after dusk, this light shining from Jerusalem's yellow limestone walls must have been spectacular. Choirs of Levites would sing during the lighting, while men of piety and good works danced in the streets, carrying torches and singing hymns.

Imagine the scene. In the very court where the lighting ceremony took place, Jesus stands beneath sixteen lit bowls of oil and says that He is not only the true light of Jerusalem, but of the whole world.

As we have seen throughout this week, the spiritual use of "light" is common throughout the Bible, and in fact, all of the ancient world. Parallels are seen in Judaism, the Old Testament, the Qumran, Hellenistic religions, and later Gnostic writings. However, Jesus' use here, and the entire scene that has just been built, is thoroughly Jewish. Jesus is referring to the countless times that God's saving work in the world is described as "light". We see this in Sunday's devotion in the beginning when God created the world. We see this in Tuesday's devotion in John chapter one. God led the Israelites in the desert with what—light (Ex. 13:21-22; Ps. 78:14). We see this in the songs that they sang from Psalm 27 (yesterday's devotion). We have seen that God's wisdom given to the world is thus a light that illumines His people from Psalm 119 (Wednesday's devotion). And now, we see it through His very Son that we celebrate coming into this world.

Christmas is a season that is deeply rooted in "light". Jesus is that light. He still stands as He did thousands of years ago proclaiming to be *THE* light, and He offers this light to *ALL*. True, it will reveal your sins, but even more, He will reveal all that is true and beautiful. He will be the light in which you see God—the light in which you see the history of redemption and the work of salvation. He will be the light to help you see mountains and valleys and oceans and rivers and trees and animals and people. Nothing will be the same again when you have him as your light.

Everything looks different in the light of Christ. Even our very own “lostness.”

And so I say with Jesus in John 12:36, “While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons [and daughters] of light.” This Christmas know and see Jesus as your precious light. Light as truth and wisdom and your way and your beauty. In the moment of death, when the world thinks “all the lights go out,” for you it will be the light of heaven.

He offers this to all. And what an offer it is! I pray you have it, and if not, you take it.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Week 2

Light Has Overcome the Darkness

Sunday, December 8

Lighting of the 2nd Advent Candle

The second candle, which is also purple, symbolizes peace. Have one member of the family light last week's candle and the second candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace,

there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: John 1:6-14

When God Bent Down

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. *The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.* He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his

own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:6-14

Unless you're not really a sports person or you were hiding under a rock, this summer marked the games of the 33rd Olympiad hosted by Paris, France. It was marked with a bit of controversy, but undoubtedly for the world and the countries involved, it was a big deal. The excitement of the games begins as the host country puts on an epic display of music, dancing, and depictions of cultural history, culminated by a torch relay which formally ends with the lighting of the Olympic cauldron. Kudos to France because the lighting of this year's cauldron did not disappoint. The cauldron was a ring of flames around twenty-three feet in diameter that was topped by a 30-meter high (about 100 feet) and 22-meter wide (about 72 feet) hot-air balloon.⁵ Once lit by Olympic gold medalists Teddy Riner and Marie-Jose' Perec, the cauldron suddenly lifted into the air in spectacular fashion. It was a visible sign that the 2024 Olympic Summer Games had begun. And, as I watched, I was reminded of Jesus' words in the Gospel of John: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). It was as if Moses and all the prophets along with John the Baptist were part of this great torch relay that culminated at the incarnation of Jesus coming into the world. You can hear it in John's words above:

He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (vv. 7-9)

The world in which we live is looking for a diagnosis of its condition and its possibilities for renewal. As you know, there are countless voices providing

⁵ Associated Press, "Olympic Cauldron Is Lit by French Gold Medalists Teddy Riner and Marie-Jose' Perec," Jenna Fryer, July 26, 2024.

messages that promise to alleviate the struggles of life or the questions that haunt us. Whether it's political voices or economic voices or pop culture voices, they all advocate for us to reallocate or reorganize or restructure. And if we do, money and material things will solve our woes. Other voices are more subtle. They advocate for the right education or therapy or vision, then all will be made right. We may need financial help to find financial freedom. We may need deep therapy for our troubled souls. These voices aren't always wrong, but their voices cannot replace The Voice—The Light that John introduces to the world.

Every year at this time we, like all the saints of God before us, are the torch bearers that again light the Christ cauldron. We light it to bear witness that there is only one hope, and it is God in Christ. In the incarnation, God exhibited the glory and grace so that humankind can regain the glory and grace it once had when it was created. At one time, because of the taint of sin, human eyes were blinded to this true light, but God acted. He bent down, He self-disclosed Himself by sending his Son. Christmas is the reminder that when God bends down and takes initiative, new possibilities are born. Transformation and hope are not found in human endeavor, but God sending his Son to bring light into darkness. As the Christ cauldron is lit again this Christmas, may we always remember the reason for the season when God bent down.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;

And grant us your salvation.

O Lord, guide those who govern us;

And lead us in the way of justice and truth.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness;

And let your people sing with joy.

O Lord, save your people;

And bless your inheritance.

Give peace in our time, O Lord;

And defend us by your mighty power.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;

Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 9

Scripture Reading: Acts 26:13-18

Christmas Lights For the Lost

I know what you may be thinking. This devotion does bear similarities to a devotion from just a few days ago, but as you read on you will see the subtle differences. Bear in mind the themes of our weeks for this devotional. Our first week, more or less, was centered on the Light, namely Jesus. This week the focus begins to shift toward us, and how Christ now calls us out of the darkness to be His witnesses. Case in point, the Apostle Paul:

“At midday, O king, I saw on the way a *light* from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”

Acts 26:13-18

By this time in the book of Acts, Paul has grown from severely persecuting believers to now becoming quite the trouble maker for the sake of Christ. In 58A.D., he was accused of having caused a riot and was sent to Caesarea to be tried by the governor Felix. Archeologists believe they have found the hall—the place of the hearing where Paul stood to bring his

case for Christ before the governor, before Agrippa, and before Bernice. I have seen it—I've stood there thinking about the verses above.

Paul shares his testimony with King Agrippa: "I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun." That's bright because the sun at midday in South Carolina is really, really bright. And above the midday sun he saw a light that shone around him and those around him. Then Jesus spoke!

Jesus, this unquenchable light, converts an utterly committed opponent of Christianity. What God wants you to see is that Paul is the kind of person that no one expects to be converted. His opposition is too deep and too articulated. God's mercy and power are not limited to people who have been set up for Christianity because of a good family name, or church association, or a good moral record.

Jesus, this unquenchable light, converts Paul for your sake (1 Tim. 1:15-16). God had you in view when He saved Paul and then sent him to Gentiles. Therefore, like Paul, let us be little Christmas lights shining Jesus to those who will listen and those who are a bit prickly. Remember God can reach anyone, and He may just use you to do it.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 10

Scripture Reading: Revelation 1:16-18

A Dashboard Jesus or Light of Your Life

It will set you back (at least on Amazon) about twelve bucks. It's a four-inch plastic bobble-head Jesus that will bounce around as you galavant around the countryside. No worries, he adheres firmly to the dashboard of your car. I do not have one but was almost convinced when one advertiser said "you can stick him where you need forgiveness and he will guide you through the valley of gridlock." I thought in a few years that would be exactly what I need in Summerville.

A few years ago, dashboard Jesus became a cultural phenomenon. In the song "Plastic Jesus," the Reverend Billy Sol Hargis, in a spoof by former radio "shock jock" Don Imus, sings, "With my plastic Jesus, goodbye and I'll go far, with my plastic Jesus sitting on the dashboard of my car." Paul Newman sang it in the movie *Cool Hand Luke* (which was a few years before my time). The song begins, "Well, I don't care if it rains or freezes, long as I have my plastic Jesus sitting on the dashboard of my car."⁶

To many people, Jesus, church, and Christianity are cultural trappings but not life-changing realities. Author Josh McDowell warns that many people today see Jesus "like a plastic statue on a car dashboard—smiling, robed, a halo suspended above his head." But that superstitious or sentimental view of Jesus is a myth. Jesus of Nazareth was no plastic saint. He's a real-world kind of Savior.⁷

You can't help but read what John saw in the book of Revelation and feel this:

⁶ David Jeremiah, "A Dashboard Jesus or My Lord Jesus", DavidJeremiah.org.

⁷ Josh McDowell and Ed Stewart, *Josh McDowell's Youth Devotions*, Book 1 (Tyndall, 2003), 21.

In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

Revelation 1:16-18

Behold the glorified Christ! John sees Him robed in holiness, majesty, dignity, and glory that shine like the blazing brightness of the noonday sun in a regal, heavenly splendor, bearing sovereignty, authority, and power.

Our question is—how does this affect John, a mere mortal?

The first effect was fear—it’s understandable. What John saw was absolutely overpowering. And we see this through the pages of Scripture. Daniel had an angelic visitor, a vision that was equally startling. He became undone. The blood rushed out of his face, and he turned as white as a corpse, and he fell on his face in the dirt, shocked by the vision that he had seen. And he, like John, fell over like a dead man.

The second effect was assurance. I love that our Lord did not deem it satisfying to leave John lying on the ground like a dead man. So what does our Lord do? He lays His right hand on him, and says, “Do not be afraid.” That’s assurance. There’s a beautiful balance of being in the presence of pure glory and falling prostrate, and then being picked up and comforted.

The third effect was duty—write! John is commended for fear, he is given assurance, and now it’s as if Jesus says, “Dust yourself off, and go to work for my sake.”

So where does it leave us? Where does it leave you with Jesus? Although we have yet to encounter what John did, the transcendent glories of God are still around about us. They’re seen in the seasons of the year—they’re seen profoundly in Advent. You were created to be more connected with the vertical things of life than to the horizontal things of life. They may be seen in our relationships, the work that God has given us to do, and the words of God found in Holy Scripture. There is much to see.

I'll give you a hint: it will not be seen in a dashboard Jesus.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 11

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:5-6

The Light of the Gospel

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

As Stan Caffy prepared for married life, he and his bride-to-be cleaned out their respective garages and sold everything to Goodwill. Between the two of them, they sold an assortment of clothes, bicycles, tools, computer parts, and a tattered copy of the *Declaration of Independence* that had been hanging in Stan's garage for the last decade.

Stan's trash turned out to be another man's treasure.

That particular version of the *Declaration of Independence* was a rare copy made in 1823. A man named Michael Sparks spotted it, and he purchased the document for \$2.48. Sparks later auctioned it for \$477,650.

Not a bad profit.

Caffy, the previous owner, was later quoted as saying, "I'm happy for the Sparks guy. If I still had it, it would still be hanging here in the garage, and I still wouldn't know it was worth all that."⁸

The moral of the story is that sometimes you never know the treasure you possess. For followers of Christ the gospel can be one such treasure. We

⁸ Associated Press, "Sold! One *Declaration of Independence* Copy," MSNBC.com (3-23-07)

believe it. In the face of Jesus, He helped us see it. He opened our eyes to see. We aren't blind. We possess it. But, like Stan we have no idea what's really hanging in the garage. In fact, like Stan we can be reminded by priests, friends, and relatives how great the treasure is that we possess and still admit it's hanging in the garage.

Paul here reminds the Corinthians, and us, how important this treasure of the gospel is. It is God who opens blind eyes to the light of the glory of Christ in the gospel. God, in the same way that he said, "Let there be light" when he created the world, he did the same thing in our hearts. God, owing nothing to us, proclaimed, "Let there be light." Like Paul, the scales fell away—the veil was lifted. The light of the glory of Christ came streaming in. We saw, felt, and found the true treasure of life. We saw Jesus for who really is—true, gracious, lover, with power and wisdom and justice, and patience.

So possessing the treasure, we dare not hang it in the garage, or this case, just walk through life not sharing this light, this treasure. Our task is simple: announce that Jesus is Lord. Now even though there is less tolerance for Christianity than there used to be—Christmas, in my opinion, is still uniquely Christian. At Christmas we can decorate with nativity scenes, talk about Jesus being the reason for the season, litter our communities with random acts of kindness and tell them why, go caroling and sing about Jesus at the top of our lungs, invite others to our Christmas festivities, send Christmas cards, be extra neighborly. The list goes on and on.

This Christmas we have been given an extraordinary treasure. Let's share it with the world.

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that, guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 12

Scripture Reading: James 1:17

The Father of Perfect Gifts

As you think about Christmases of yesteryear—have you ever received that perfect gift from someone? Perhaps it was when you were little and you got that one thing that you were always dreaming of. I grew up in the eighties when the Nintendo gaming console was launched with games titles like *Duck Hunt*, *Hogan's Alley*, and most famous, *Super Mario Brothers*. My parents purchased it for me for Christmas, which I described with one word—perfect.

But, perfect is subjective isn't it? Perfect is in the eye of the beholder. What may be a perfect gift to someone, to someone else it may be far less than perfect, which reminds me of a great story concerning Corrie ten Boom and her sister that I read several years ago.

The barracks where she and her sister, Betsy, were kept in the Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbruck, were terribly overcrowded and flea-infested. Miraculously, they had been able to smuggle a Bible into the camp, whereby they read that in all things they were to give thanks and that God can use anything for good. In Betsy's mind, she decided that this meant thanking God for the fleas. For Corrie, that was not going to happen. Betsy insisted, so Corrie finally gave in and prayed to God, thanking Him even for the fleas.

Over the next several months a wonderful, but curious thing happened: They found that the guards would not enter their barracks.

This meant that the women were not assaulted. It also meant that they were able to do the unthinkable, which was to hold open Bible studies and prayer meetings in the heart of a Nazi concentration camp. Through this, countless numbers of women came to faith in Christ.

Only at the end did they discover why the guards had left them alone and would not enter their barracks: It was because of the fleas.⁹

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

James 1:17

Perfection may be subjective when gifted by another human, but not God. We need to be reminded that what flows from our heavenly Father is only good—indeed perfect.

At the time of this writing, our world is not doing well. Iran just lobbed well over a hundred ballistic rockets into Israel. The political landscape has everyone at each other's throats. The cost of common household goods has many families pinching pennies. Not only that, but dock workers have gone on a strike that could eventually cause store shelves to empty. There can be little doubt that such a verse as James 1:17, or such a trusting prayer of gratitude, will be challenging to consider.

But when you feel that challenge, take a moment and remember the fleas of Ravensbruck. And thank God anyway.

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

⁹ James Emery White, "Thankful for the Fleas," *Christianity.com* Blog (2017).

Friday, December 13

Scripture Reading: Psalm 18:28

Who Lightens Your Darkness?

I have to admit that David is not my favorite biblical character, but he's darn close. On the surface, there was simply nothing special about David. The only physical description we have of young David is Samuel's: "He was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome" (1 Samuel 16:12). Ruddy? Some have taken this to mean that David was a red-head, but I believe what Samuel is getting at is his complexion. He was reddened or bronzed from the hours spent out in the sun and the wind. But still, his appearance didn't seem to set him apart from other Jewish boys his age. He was nothing more than a shepherd living in the little village of Bethlehem.

What about the world in which he lived? G. Frederick Owen, in his book *Abraham to the Middle-East Crisis*, describes David's world in one sentence, "The people were on a long drift from God."¹⁰

As what often happens in Scripture, spiritually dark times call on spiritually lightened people of God. Our Lord is always looking for special people at difficult times. And suddenly, this young nobody became somebody, and not because he was the people's choice (they chose Saul), but because God chose him.

David was possibly in the middle of his reign as king of Israel when he penned this song in chapter eighteen. The song itself suggests that it was sung by David at different times when he reviewed his own remarkable history and the gracious hand of God in it all. The song itself could be titled, "The Grateful Retrospect." David is direct in his gratitude, owing all

¹⁰ G. Frederick Owen, *Abraham to the Middle-East Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1939, 1957), 45.

of it to his God who had delivered him. He had none to thank but the Lord whose right hand had preserved him.

Strikingly he says in verse twenty-eight:

For it is you who light my lamp; the Lord my God lightens my darkness.

Psalm 18:28

For David, it is the Lord's light that was always a constant hope in an uncomfortable state. When enemies pursued, when cords of death encompassed him, when in distress, when confronted by those who hated him, those who were stronger, it was God's light that brought him out of his darkness.

God was not a stranger to where David was. God is not a stranger to where you are. Just as God's light met David where he was—the same is true for you and me. Christmas reminds us again and again that Jesus is our deliverer. The rub is that we feel and know that throughout the Advent season, but when it's all packed up and goes away, sadness falls—our spirits fall. Christmas spirit is dispelled until next year.

On the other hand, Christmas is about Christ showing up and invading real root issues of our hearts that lead to all other broken spaces in our lives and deliver us from them. God didn't send us Moses, but Jesus, God in the flesh, the Son of God. And He didn't just come to deliverer us from symptomatic sins but came to free our souls forever. The Christ of Christmas (like for David) is our Lord our God, who lightens our darkness. And at His second coming and last arrival He will invade all the darkness of our world and make all things new.

Today we are a day closer. Like David, let this be an encouragement.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 14

Scripture Reading: Job 33:28

Life Looking Upon the Light

Yesterday our character focus was David. Today our character focus is Job. The two honestly could not be more different. Yes both were courageous, but Job's life was full of pain and loss, and humiliation and hardship. A read through the ancient book that bears his name almost leaves the reader heart-broken and confused. Job is a tale of tragedy.

In the midst of Job's suffering, pain, loss, and tragedy, he has four friends who come to him to give him some advice. Three gave bad advice, and one gave good advice. What we learn in this real drama of Job's life is that not all advice is good advice.

A man had finished lunch and was in his car driving toward his next appointment. His mind drifted back to the previous evening. He began to be troubled about the heated argument he'd had with his wife. It was one of those ongoing, unresolved conflicts, so he decided it was time to make up. Feeling guilty over some of the things he'd said, he picked up his cell phone and hurriedly dialed home in the midst of a traffic jam. When the maid answered the call, he said, "I'd like to speak to my wife." She responded, "Well, she told me she doesn't want to be disturbed right now." Curious, he asked, "Doesn't want to be disturbed?" The maid said, "That's right—she's upstairs with her boyfriend, and she told me she doesn't want to be interrupted." Infuriated, the husband lost it. "You know where I keep my shotgun? Go get it and put in two shells, then walk upstairs and kill both of them."

She put the phone down, got the double-barrel gun and walked upstairs. He listened, heard two blasts, then waited. She came back down, calmly picked up the phone, and said, "Okay, it's done, they're dead. What do you want me to do with the bodies?" He said, "Throw 'em in the pool, and I'll

take care of the rest when I get there.” She said, “We don’t have a pool.” He paused, then said, “Is this 728-3604?”¹¹

Not all advice is good advice, and Job was the recipient of a lot of bad advice. But, Elihu was not like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. He began speaking by the Spirit in Job 32:8, and it was new talk, new advice, good godly advice that Job needed to heed. Did Job listen? Well, he definitely didn’t argue with Elihu. I think the reason is because Job’s conscience is pricked by the teaching of these chapters. But what I have always been drawn to by what Elihu says to Job is this:

“He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.”

Job 33:28

The context here in chapter thirty-three is a wonderful description of what it means to be saved by God. Essentially Elihu’s advice to Job is that there is a great redeemer. A redeemer who saves souls from the pit. A redeemer who is a ransom for many. A redeemer who became like us. And notice, Elihu says that now his “life shall look upon the light.” There is no greater advice for a friend than to plead with them to live in light of God’s deliverance.

We need friends like Elihu don’t we? There will be times when others’ words only make our troubles worse. But, with friends like Elihu they bring clarity to darkness. They say the things you need to hear, not necessarily the things you want to hear.

Today, this Saturday, December 14, know that you have a great redeemer. His name is Jesus! Continue to live in light of the deliverance of God through Jesus Christ. Take this advice from a friend who loves and cares about you.

¹¹ Swindoll, Charles R. “Great Lives: Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance,” *Great Lives from God's Word*, Thomas Nelson, Kindle Edition (p. 74).

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Week 3

Light Has Come to Rescue Us In the Darkness

Sunday, December 15

Lighting of the 3rd Advent Candle

The third candle, which is rose colored, symbolizes joy. Have one member of the family light the last two weeks candles and the third candle.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace,

there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 2:9

Proclaiming His Excellencies

I grew up in the Midwest, and there we have four seasons. My wife and I, as we have lived in South Carolina, have often found ourselves missing snow. Yes, you read that right. We miss the snow. What I wouldn't do to have a white Christmas in Summerville, South Carolina. I have pleaded with God for ten years that it would be so to no avail. Now, to be fair I don't

miss scraping icy car windows, or jumping into an absolutely freezing car. But, there is something amazing about the gently falling snow.

I believe the snow and weather of various types is a gift from God. When our spiritual senses are heightened and when we slow down enough to catch these glimpses, they are reminders of His excellences.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies of him* who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

We are reminded this week in Advent that Christ came to give us purpose. We have been rescued out of darkness through the light of Christ, and now we belong to God. If Peter were to put it in a phrase, it would be this: remember whose you are! We are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood.” We are His not by any merit of our own, but totally by mercy and grace. It’s not because of where we were born. It’s not because of our family name, how good I have become, because I go to church, or because God needs me. The pull to be accepted can influence many things in our lives, from the clothes we wear, the kind of car we drive, the kind of house we buy, and even the career we choose. But, know that this is not how God works. Even with our faults, frailties, character flaws, shortcomings, and all, God accepts us as we are. You are His—no conditions or restrictions. You are on His team because He wants you just the way you are.

We are “a people for his own possession.” The question is how much do you think you’re worth? Self-worth? Paul, in his first book to the Corinthians, said that, “You were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:23). You were bought and God did the buying, and you were purchased through the blood of Jesus. The cross proves your value. God says I love you this much.

So now that we know whose we are, what are we to do with this? Peter reminds us that we now have purpose. We are His so “that you (and I) may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” I now live to proclaim His excellences! Part of God’s

incredible excellences is His creation. The snow that blankets the ground after a fresh snowfall is clean, beautiful, and pure. It is excellent in that it reminds me that though my sins be as scarlet, they have been made as white as snow. Oh, the excellences of God! The steady rain that falls that makes me want to cuddle up with a blanket and take a nap. The steady rain that falls that replenishes our planet and its inhabitants. Oh, the excellences of God! The sun and the warmth it brings—it is the greatest metaphor for the glory of God. In the Midwest you may have a greater appreciation for it because there are months of cold and gray skies. When it's out, you just want to bask in it. Oh, the excellences of God! We keep going, the mountains, the ocean, the seasons of spring, summer, and fall.

We are God's, and one of our purposes is to proclaim His excellences. In this Advent season don't forget to remember the gifts that God has given you.

Oh, the excellences of God!

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;
And grant us your salvation.
O Lord, guide those who govern us;
And lead us in the way of justice and truth.
Clothe your ministers with righteousness;
And let your people sing with joy.
O Lord, save your people;
And bless your inheritance.
Give peace in our time, O Lord;
And defend us by your mighty power.
Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;
Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.
Create in us clean hearts, O God;
And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

O Lord Jesus Christ, you sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found a people acceptable in your sight; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God and Father of all, whom the whole heavens adore: Let the whole earth also worship you, all nations obey you, all tongues confess and bless you, and men, women, and children everywhere love you and serve you in peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all

whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 16

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:68-79

Mission Rescue

Philip Yancey, in his book *Rumors of Another World*, tells a story that took place off the tip of Argentina in the islands of Tierra del Fuego. In the 1500s, when Magellan's explorers passed those shores, they noticed fires burning on the shore. But the natives, as they tended those fires, paid no attention to the great ships passing before their very eyes. Later, they explained that they considered the ships apparitions, mere figments of their imagination. Those ships were so different from anything they had ever seen that they simply could not believe their eyes. Then Yancey asks this penetrating question:

And we who built the skyscrapers in New York, who build today not just galleons but space stations and Hubble telescopes that peer to the very edge of the universe, what about us? What are we missing? What do we not see, for lack of imagination or faith?¹²

God breaks into our lives our world, only for many to miss it. Many chalk it up as an anomaly, a coincidence, or a strange moment in our lives that must have some logical explanation.

While in the temple, God broke into Zechariah's life through the angel Gabriel. Zechariah, like most of us, upon seeing Gabriel becomes troubled in spirit and fearful. Gabriel delivers the news that his wife will bear a son. Yes, the wife that he has who is barren. Not only that, but both Zechariah and Elizabeth are elderly, or advanced in years. As for the son that they shall have Gabriel says, "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord" (Luke 1:14-15a). How does Zechariah take the good news? Not well. Luke tells

¹² Yancey, Philip. *Rumors of Another World: What on Earth Are We Missing?*. Zondervan, 2003.

us that he did not believe the news, and therefore became mute until John was born. For Zechariah it was a matter of logic. Old people don't have children.

But, let's not be too harsh on Zechariah because more times than not we've been there. God has tried to get our attention—broken into our lives only for us to fall into the trappings of despair, unfaithfulness, and discouragement.

God has a way of finally breaking through though, doesn't He? Through God's great rescue mission He helps us to see, whereby we eventually turn from unfaithfulness or discouragement to God's unwavering promises.

Then, like Zechariah, we find our voice again, and we sing:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Luke 1:68-79

Two big ideas that I want to point out concerning Zechariah's prophecy concerning this child:

- Jesus rescues us—He did not come to marginally improve our lives or teach us clever antidotes. Jesus broke into our world to rescue it—to redeem us out of bondage.

- Jesus unleashes His light and peace into our world. The world was cloaked in darkness and strife, but the sunrise of that Christmas morn brought light to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 17

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 5:8-10

Walking As Children of the Light

For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Ephesians 5:8-11

While growing up, I had two older brothers who were ten and eight years older than me. I loved and looked up to my brothers. Tim was ten years older than me. I have a few fond memories of Tim being around, but for the most part Tim was on his way out of the house by the time I could remember much. On the other hand, Mark was eight years older. Unlike Tim, Mark was in his later years of high school, about which I remember much. In the small Illinois town where I grew up, my brother Mark was the star athlete on both his basketball and baseball teams. Mark was my hero. When most kids my age were wanting to grow up to be like Mike (Michael Jordan)—I wanted to be like my brother Mark. He taught me everything. How to shoot a basketball, throw a baseball, ride a bike. I would watch him play basketball only to go home and try to imitate his every move. In almost every facet of life I wanted to be like my big brother Mark.

This is not an uncommon concept to most of us. No one has to teach children to imitate their parents. Little girls cradle their babies just like Mommy cradles her newborn. Little boys want to hammer or turn wrenches just like Daddy.

When Paul wrote, “Imitate God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1), we understand Paul’s point. We are exhorted to imitate our Father, who is light. The question is how?

Paul tells us, “Walk as children of light.” There are three bright gems in this text as we think about what it means to “walk as children of light.”

1. *Light produces good fruit in our lives.* Living and walking in light describes our behavior. Paul defined light by what it produces. “For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true” (v. 9). Contrast that with the immorality of the sexually immoral, or the idolater of verse five.
2. *Light defines our new identity.* “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (v. 8). We were darkness, dead in our trespasses, slaves to sin, until God gave us life through His Son who defeated death and the grave. Now because of our adoption and new life in Christ, we are light. Verse 14 says it best:

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

3. *Light exposes darkness*—we expose “the unfruitful works of darkness.” Paul’s intentions are not to march others’ sins before our high moral court. Rather, it is our winsome light that would reveal the contrast. Living honestly exposes dishonesty. Living with integrity exposes hypocrisy. Living with a pure heart exposes hard hearts.

Be imitators of Jesus—walk as children of light.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Wednesday, December 18

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:14-16

This Little Light of Mine

This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm going to let it shine

Put it under a bushel—No!
I'm going to let it shine
Put it under a bushel—No!
I'm going to let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

I have vivid memories of singing this tune when I was just a wee little lad. Granted, I had no idea what a bushel was, but I knew what a light was. And, I also knew that it was more than my finger that I waved around while singing the song. I knew that I was to be the light of Jesus.

Fast forward through the many years and the question could be asked: how bright is my light shining for Jesus? Is it brighter now? Has it dimmed? The question could be asked of you as a follower of Christ. The question could be asked of us as a local church here in the Lowcountry. Jesus said:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 5:14-16

Jesus always called His followers to be radically different. We are to be counter-cultural—living for a bigger, greater kingdom than our own. Therefore, Jesus, in chapter five, uses metaphors for how different His followers are to be: two, to be exact—salt and light.

As we know, salt can stop decay. Salt can add flavor. Salt can create a thirst. What about light? As we learned yesterday, light dispels darkness. Light is also noticed—when you put light upon a mountain, everybody sees it. “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” As the light of Jesus, people will notice you. We dare not hide the light of Jesus that is within us. Jesus gives us this analogy from his day of lighting a lamp and putting it under a basket. The analogy is to shake us back into reality—no one would do that! Instead we light our lamps and place them in prominent places to give us light to dispel the darkness that is there, so that we can see and serve.

We know elsewhere in scripture that local churches are to be places of light. The warning to the church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation was to “repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). In other words, repent or he will remove your light—it will be snuffed out. If churches abandon their love for the light, then the light will go away. Sadly, we may know of churches that have done just that. May that never happen to our beloved parish—our church. May all that we do be motivated by a deep, rich love for our Savior. We are reminded every Sunday together “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

Therefore, being a Christ-follower might be a bit strange to the world, and yet it does not make us strangers to the world; rather, it makes us more affective in reaching it. You and I won’t win the world to Christ by hiding our light; therefore, let your little light shine!

Prayer for the Day

O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to the beginning of this day: Defend us by your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin nor run into any danger; and that,

guided by your Spirit, we may do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Thursday, December 19

Scripture Reading: 1 John 1:7

Strengthening Relationships Amid Holiday Stress

Let's be honest, relationships can be difficult. Relationships can be difficult especially around the holidays. The holidays every year present an opportunity to come together, but the coming together can present unwarranted stress.

Holidays present strain on marriages. Couples that are newly married have different hopes and expectations. She may expect that the holidays are meant to be spent with her family, and he feels the same way about his family. For those of us who have been married for a while, stress and pain typically come from the demands that the holidays bring.

Holidays present strain on us as individuals. Many of us will go to mom and dad's for Christmas. For some, when we cross the threshold of our childhood homes, warm memories flood our mind, memories that are lovely and comforting. But, for others, dark memories flood the mind. They are stuck in the emotions surrounding bad memories from the past.

Holidays present strain on us who are faithful in attending church. During the holidays, the language of thankfulness, joy, cheer, and love are amplified. Those who attend who don't feel much of those emotions tend to make matters worse. I wrote these words a few years ago:

. . . the season of Advent—the holidays can be very painful days. These days can be filled with the painful memories, earth-bound anxieties, and endless amounts of doing and going. The fact is that it's hard to rejoice in these days, let alone be glad in them. And whether it's Christmas Day or any other day—we all have those days when the sky is going to fall. Right? I know I do. Sometimes it seems like when it rains, it pours.

So what's the answer? The holidays are not going anywhere. We simply can't change the language of scripture that Advent and Christmas represent. We can't mute our worship of "Joy to the World," or the words of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," whereby we sing "Joyful, all ye nations rise."

John helps us when he explains:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1 John 1:5-8

The first thing to notice is that we are all sinners, but the blood of Jesus has cleansed us all. Sin has made a mess of the world. Sin has made a mess of us. Paul said, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). *Relationships get messy because of who we are, and we forget this.* Adopted by God, yes. Bought with the blood of the Lamb, yes. But, the remnants of sinful flesh remain. Don't ever forget this when you are tempted to look down at someone with a condemning attitude. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). This helps us love and come alongside our unbelieving family members. Why? Because we are more like them in more ways than one.

Therefore, as we remember who we are, "we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another." When we think of fellowship with other brothers and sisters in our church or family we typically think of shared beliefs, and convictions, and behaviors. But, think of fellowship with others as empathy. We should share in our sufferings.

"If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26). God's metaphor for the church is the human body—each is dependent on every

other part. When you hurt, I hurt because we are both one body in Christ. Our fellowship and love for one another goes deeper than commonalities.

Relationships can get messy, but you and I have the light of Christ. We are light because He was light. We love because He first loved us. The answer is Christ living in you and me. He will build and mend our relationships to all that He intended them to be. Even the relationship to ourselves.

Prayer for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Friday, December 20

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:22-27

A Great Day

Five more days until Christmas! Can you feel the anticipation? How does the old song go?

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas
Ev'rywhere you go
Take a look at the five and ten
Glistening once again
With candy canes and silver lanes that glow

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas
Toys in ev'ry store
But the prettiest sight to see
Is the holly that will be
On your own front door¹³

It rolls around once a year, and thereafter I am counting down the days until it comes again. If you know me, then you know I love Christmas. I love everything about it—the scents, the decorations, the nostalgia, the food, the giving and receiving of gifts, the music, the movies, the lights-- did I mention I love the food?

On Christmas Eve here at St. Paul's, I am involved in the five o'clock family service and the eleven o'clock service in the church building. I simply cannot get enough of the celebration. I often think to myself, "I wish we could celebrate Christmas every day of the year." Then my mind takes me to Revelation chapter twenty-one:

¹³ Written by Meredith Wilson, 1951.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

If you belong to Jesus—yours is such a glorious future. But, know this: heaven is not just for the future. Heaven is for the here, and it is for the now. For tomorrow, this instant, for this year's Christmas, and all the Christmases to come—heaven is meant to bless your life paths today and to be a source of hope and encouragement in the midst of a fallen world. Therefore, take heart as we wait for our forever home. Allow heaven to encourage us in the here and now, but also envision (if at all possible) what that day will be like when we do, as John says, see with our eyes “the glory of God giving it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” I love how Joni Erickson Tada puts it:

As human beings, we're so little and tiny and compact; we're just too small for how big God's joy really is. When we "enter into the joy of the Lord," it is so grand and glorious and great, it breaks the human container. It splits the seams of our finiteness because it's so infinite, and we have to cry. The overflow has to spill. I think this is why joy, like love, can break our hearts like nothing else. It overtakes us, it enraptures us.¹⁴

In other words, heaven will be Christmas joy, but not just once a year. Our joy will be made complete and real. We will eat, we will taste, we will smell, we will hold and behold in more ways than we could ever imagine. It is here on earth that things are fleeting. One day it is here, and the next it is gone. Not in heaven. And the best part? It will have no end. The crowning glory of heaven is that we will behold our God and He will behold

¹⁴ Joni Erickson Tada, sermon on Revelation 21 called, “Heaven, Our Real Home.”

the nations, and our Christmas joy will have no end. It will always be an enchanting beginning.

In these final days of Advent, I pray that you have Christmas joy. May our heavenly home encourage your heart in the here and now. May our heavenly home give you joy as you envision the day when we will walk through the gates that are never to be shut to behold His glory.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. **Amen.**

Saturday, December 21

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7

The Promise of Light

Do you ever get bored or tired of hearing the same old story over and over again? You know, the same old story about the prediction of Jesus being born. I am not naïve enough to doubt that every year when Christmas rolls around there may be the proverbial yawn. “Not this Jesus thing again.” It's like the story of the preacher who's greeting folks after the end of the service on Christmas Eve. This one man slithers up to him and says, “You know, preacher, every time I come to hear you preach you talk about the birth of Jesus. I wish you'd find something else to talk about.” It is passages like Isaiah nine and the early portions of the gospel that are so familiar that they lose the zing that they once had.

How we respond to the messages of this time of year may indicate our own spiritual temperature.

The people of God in the Old Testament were no different.

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty

God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:1-7

Isaiah is writing in a time of great apostasy. The people of God have turned their backs to God—the Southern Kingdom of Israel (Judah) is in shambles. The gloom is spilling over in to chapter nine from chapter eight, whereby Isaiah is warning Judah about the coming invasion from Assyria. Isaiah paints the picture that the people are walking in darkness. They are in desperate need of God—need of light. So what will happen?

Verse six says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” There’s a lot of promise in the birth of a child. Parents dream about whether the child will be more like Mom or Dad. Parents dream about what impact on society the child will make. Whether their child will be the next great professional athlete or Olympian. This child of Isaiah nine will hold much promise. Kingship and rule will ultimately rest on his shoulders. “His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Obviously, this promised child will be far different from other children.

But here’s the thing—this child would not come for another 700 years. And yet, God refused to let darkness reign. God’s promises always come to pass, don’t they? This is why biblical hope is unshakable. Biblical hope not only desires something good for the future—it expects it. And it not only expects it to happen—it is confident that it will happen. There is a moral certainty that the good we expect and desire will be done. Why? Because biblical hope is a hope in God! His promised light came in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem. The God who brings honor over shame is the God who brings light over darkness is the God who brings joy over despair.

This birth message never gets old. Jesus Christ has come to save sinners. And in the babe in this manger he took care of us by going to the cross.

That is beautiful, not boring. The predictable message of the birth of Christ shows us that a Wonderful, Almighty, Everlasting Prince reigns now and forever.

Prayer for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Week 4

Celebrating the Light of Christmas

Sunday, December 22

Lighting of the 4th Advent Candle

The four candle, which is purple, symbolizes love. Have one member of the family light the last three weeks candles and the fourth candle.

The next four days is all about L-O-V-E that we have received from the hands of God through Jesus in the manger.

Evening Prayer

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

Mark 13:35-36

Confession of Sin

Dearly beloved, the Scriptures teach us to acknowledge our many sins and offenses, not concealing them from our heavenly Father, but confessing them with humble and obedient hearts that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. We ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before Almighty God, but especially when we come together in his presence to give thanks for the great benefits we have received at his hands, to declare his most worthy praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things which are necessary for our life and our salvation. Therefore, draw near with me to the throne of heavenly grace.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. **Amen.**

Grant to your faithful people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

O gladsome light, pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven, O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed! Now as we come to the setting of the sun, and our eyes behold the vesper light, we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices, O Son of God, O Giver of Life, and to be glorified through all the worlds.

The Song of Simeon

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people; To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen.

Luke 2:29-32

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38

The Promise of Light Part II

I would like to draw your attention to a word found in verse 30, “favor.” It is a word that is definitely written all over the Christmas story. It is defined as, “approval, support, or liking for someone or something.”¹⁵

A young woman, who was a nobody and lived in a nobody town, was about to get the surprise of her life. Her name was Mary.

We read:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

¹⁵ Google’s English dictionary is provided by Oxford Languages.

She was highly favored. The Lord was with her. One pastor said this:

When the angel says to Mary "you are highly favored," he is saying to the mother of our Lord, "You are uniquely privileged." It is marvelous, is it not? She carried the life of God within her. She was highly favored because she was the one by whom the Son of God was born into the world. You may say, "That is marvelous for Mary. But what in the world does it have to do with my life today?" What do you think a Christian is? People would give different answers to that question. Some people might say, "A Christian is a person who believes in Jesus." Someone else might say, "A Christian is someone who follows the teaching and the example of Jesus." Both these things are true. But neither of them cut to the core of what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian means that the life of Jesus is in you.¹⁶

I have to be honest--I have never thought of that passage that way, but the theme is prevalent throughout the New Testament. Paul says, "It's Christ in you that is your hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), and "I've been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches" (John 15:1). If you are a Christian, you carry this marvelous privilege. The life of God is in you. This theme explodes when Jesus, thirty years later, proclaims the words of Isaiah: "To proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19). This is what Jesus came to do. He came to bring the year of the Lord's favor, not the day of the Lord's justice.

The promise of God's Son brought favor, grace, and mercy. Jesus came to cancel the debt of sin. Christmas is about the favor of God in the birth of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we embrace it like Mary and say, "May it be to me according to your word."

¹⁶ Colin Smith, sermon on Luke 2 titled "God's Favor."

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

The Prayers

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

O Lord, show your mercy upon us;

And grant us your salvation.

O Lord, guide those who govern us;

And lead us in the way of justice and truth.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness;

And let your people sing with joy.

O Lord, save your people;

And bless your inheritance.

Give peace in our time, O Lord;

And defend us by your mighty power.

Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten;

Nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

Create in us clean hearts, O God;

And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

Prayer for the Week

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and as we are sorely hindered by our sins from running the race that is set before

us, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for Mission

O God, you manifest in your servants the signs of your presence: Send forth upon us the Spirit of love, that in companionship with one another your abounding grace may increase among us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The General Thanksgiving

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Romans 15:13

Monday, December 23

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

The Guiding Light

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Matthew 2:1-12

I have a new found appreciation for lighthouses. My wife and I recently took a trip to St. Augustine, Florida, where we visited the lighthouse. I vividly remember looking up and telling Jamie, “I don’t think I can get to the top.” There is a self-guided climb up the 219 step spiral staircase. I think I made it up about 30 and back down I went. Like I said, I have a new profound appreciation for all the lighthouse keepers that unlike me are not afraid of heights and were faithful in keeping the light lit. For 150 years, the lighthouse in St. Augustine has warned mariners of shallow waters and guided them to safety.

But, not all lighthouses have done their job well, such as the one that stood on a large peninsula jutting into the Tasman Sea in southern Australia. It stood at a place where it shouldn’t have been, luring ignorant ships into the very rocks they were trying to avoid.

The cliffs around Cape St. George just south of Jervis Bay were notorious for shipwrecks, so it was decided that a lighthouse was needed for the safe navigation of coastal shipping. In 1857, the colonial architect Alexander Dawson began looking for a site suitable for a lighthouse on Cape St. George. Unfortunately, Dawson was more interested in the ease of construction rather than providing an efficient navigation aid.

When the Pilots Board went to verify the location Dawson chose, they found that the site was not visible from the required approaches. They also found Dawson’s map suffered from “discrepancies so grave that it is impossible to decide whether positions marked on the map really exist.” The board also suspected that Dawson chose the site solely because it was situated closer to a quarry he planned to obtain stones from.

Despite the glaring deficiencies and disagreement by a majority of the board, for reasons not known, the chairman of the board authorized the construction of the lighthouse. For the next four decades the ill-sited lighthouse was responsible for some two dozen shipwrecks. Eventually in 1899, the lighthouse was replaced by the Point Perpendicular Lighthouse in a much more suitable location on that part of the coast.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kaushik, “The Lighthouse That Wrecked More Ships Than it Saved,” AmusingPlanet.Com (10-16-18)

Lighthouses are meant to guide and warn. They are there to point the way to safe harbor. Like the lighthouses of our day, the Magi were given a guide, a light, a star that would lead them to what their hearts desired. You see that in verse two when they came saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Notice, they didn’t say we saw a star—we saw a star among thousands of stars. They say, “We saw his star.” It’s His star because He’s the only way. He is “the way the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Christmas is about His light—His star.

Like the Magi, who were in search for the King of kings and Lord of lords, have we found Him? I pray that your answer is a resounding YES! But, what about your children? What about your spouse? What about your extended family members? What about your neighbors and neighborhood? Know this: God will use you to guide others to the Savior of the world. That is the great commission. This Christmas, God’s calling upon your life might be to go on a great journey. A journey to guide others through the tumultuous world and lead them to the Jesus. After all, He’s the one worthy of all the gifts that we might give Him. Give Him your life—you won’t regret it.

Prayer for the Day

O God, the King eternal, whose light divides the day from the night and turns the shadow of death into the morning: Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to keep your law, and guide our feet into the way of peace; that, having done your will with cheerfulness during the day, we may, when night comes, rejoice to give you thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Tuesday, December 24, Christmas Eve

Lighting of the Christ Candle

The final candle, which is white, symbolizes Christ the light of the world. Have one member of the family light the four advent candles and the Christ candle.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

The Light of God's Glory

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those

with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20

My earnest prayer through this entire devotion for you is that you would see the light of God’s glory in the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. And, in seeing it you would be like a modern day John the Baptist and testify to it. You and I have been lifted out of the dark caverns of sin. Out of guilt and shame. Out of fear and have been brought into the bright light of God’s grace. How can we not help but spread this light?

In many ways symbolically that is what you will do tonight if you attend our services at St. Paul’s. You may be reading this and will attend another church, and they may do the same. But, we take candles. Both young and old stand and we spread the flame of the Christ candle throughout our churches.

But, my prayer is that you not only do this on Christmas Eve, but that you would do this through your life as you live each day. Christ came into the world, but many tonight have not received Him. Therefore, may we take the light—Christmas light to streets and neighborhoods of Summerville. The Christmas spirit does not end tomorrow, and it doesn’t end after the twelve days of Christmas. Christmas light should endure in our hearts and be taken to the world twelve months out of the year.

In Luke 2:12, the angel gives the shepherds a sign. The angel says, “This Savior, this Christ, this Lord — you will find him ‘lying in a feeding trough.’” I cannot help but think that the shepherds, at that point, would have been

totally confused: Savior, Christ, Lord—plus dirty, smelly feeding trough? But before they can venture to ask this angel for clarification, the sky fills with armies of angels praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14).

The Savior is born. The Messiah is born. The Lord of the universe is born. And before you or the shepherds can layer an interpretation on top of it, they hear the point: “Glory to God in the highest.” Jesus was born to show that God is glorious. His mission was to show the world, and the powers of darkness, that God is infinitely great and beautiful and glorious. Jesus is the Light of God’s glory!

Have a very Merry Christmas!

Prayer for the Day

Lord, on this Christmas Eve, we pause to prepare our hearts for a most beautiful celebration: Your birth and coming to earth as our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Clear our minds so we can focus on You and the joy You bring to us through Your gift of salvation. May the same thrill and anticipation that filled Mary, the chosen mother of Jesus, consume us and draw us close to You. May our spirits cry out, “Alleluia,” with the host of angels who first delivered the good news of great joy to humble, awe-struck shepherds that night so long ago—the news that would literally one day be heard around the world. Just as the three Magi brought their offerings in celebration of Your birth, we bring You gifts, too: the declaration of our obedience and devotion to You, the quieting of our hearts and spirits, and the joyful overflow of worship and adoration. May this preparation night be a holy night as we once again receive and celebrate Your great gift to us this Christmas.¹⁸ **Amen.**

¹⁸ A Christmas Eve Prayer to Prepare Your Heart, Crosswalk.com

Biblically Minded - Christ Centered - Holy Spirit Driven

"I Am the Light of the World- Jesus



Four weeks every year comes one of the profound seasons of the church calendar, Advent. It's a season that reminds us of God's faithfulness. God promised and meticulously planned the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ. That he would be veiled in flesh, born of a young virgin named Mary.

Advent is an annual rhythm that busy Christians need. We are in desperate need of reorientation, a sense of direction. That's truer now than any time of the year, because of all of the distractions and busyness. Therefore, come and marvel again at what marvelous things God has done. Joy arises from our great salvation. Peace has come as a gift of great price to God.

Rooted in the past yet relevant today: St. Paul's sows the Good News of Jesus for all people, cultivates servant leaders, and grows neighborly communities.