



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School  
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

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**Christmas Eve**

**December 24, 2019**

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**“The Light Shines in the Darkness”**

*(John 1:5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

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

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing  
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

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

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Christmas has always been a messy business. Luther said we probably sin more at this time of the year than any other. We envision well dressed, good looking people chatting and laughing with flutes of bubbly champagne before a crackling fire. It never quite happens that way. Instead, your uncle, who has had a bit too much, brings up a sensitive topic at the table, causing your mother-in-law to burst into tears. Your sister-in-law who is a teetotaler and a good Christian in the worst sense, gives you the stink eye for serving such beverages. Then, later, when the gifts are unwrapped, someone feels slighted, overlooked, and grows resentful, privately resolving to leave early and never come back.

A lot can go wrong with our Christmas celebrations, and something usually does. It's a messy business. The first Christmas was messy too.

Right from the start Mary is the mother of all surprise children. Joseph knows he's not the father, so he's thinking he needs a good divorce attorney. With a dream the Lord stops him from making that mistake. And just when they're starting to adjust, Caesar orders a census. It couldn't have come at a worst time. Mary is nearly full term, great with child. When she walks, there's a bit of a waddle in it. How on earth did they make that 80 mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem? It required at least four or five days. Once they arrive, there is no room or welcome for them in little Bethlehem. The village is overwhelmed with guests and no one sees fit to give way even to a woman giving birth. So a stable will have to do.

Thick dust covers every horizontal surface, and there are cob webs in the vertical spaces. It smells of animals and dung, and for however badly Joseph feels about it, Mary, now in the throws of labor, feels worse. Intense pain, water and blood, baby and placenta. That baby needs to be dried off and wrapped up tight against the cold. There can be no delays. In that era, just living through childbirth was a triumph. And now here come the soldiers of Herod with their murderous orders to fulfill.

Christmas has always been a messy business. But the astonishing claim of Scripture is God's Son left the glory of heaven and was born as an infant into our chaos and clutter, our sin and darkness and death. He doesn't protect himself from any of it. He enters into it. And he's not just wearing a costume. He's fully human, almighty, but also weak and mortal. The early church called him the GodMan. It's an enduring mystery.

His motives are clear enough: Any God who comes to us as an infant means us no harm, that's for sure. His aim is to help us. God is no monster as some make him out to be. His aim is to save us. You see, the human race rebelled against our creator, and had become estranged from God, alienated, with a growing hostility toward him. God aches for his estranged children (some of you can identify with that ache), so God takes the initiative. We didn't have it in us to do so because the sinful mind is hostile to God. God takes the initiative and is born into a messy, broken, sinful world, and a dangerous world . . . dangerous even for the GodMan.

It's a world where we are also estranged from one another. Example: We have to teach our school children survival skills when a deranged gunman opens fire. It's a world where many moms and dads don't see fit to extend hospitality to their infants in the first place. No room or welcome is shown them, even as there was little of it shown to the infant Jesus. It's a world that is well familiar with such inky, black darkness.

And please remember, the problem of sin isn't just out there someplace. We are not only the victims here. There are storehouses of darkness within each of our hearts. We excrete on the world like an octopus excretes its black inkiness. "Out of the heart" Jesus said, "come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."

Simultaneously, amidst our evil, we know it's a world that can be so beautiful, a creation full of light, whether looking at distant galaxies through the Hubble telescope, or snowflakes through a microscope, whether pondering how it is that a baby is knit together in the womb, or how the same robin comes back every year to the same tree near the same house.

Sometimes we see things in the world that are so beautiful that it makes you ache on the inside. The psalmist said it this way, "As a deer pants for streams of flowing water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the

living God” (Ps. 42:1). So, occasionally we yearn for God, but there’s still that estrangement and distance from God, a ladder into heaven that we cannot find, nor climb even if we did. If there is to be reconciliation with God he’ll have to come down to us. And that is precisely why that baby was born in Bethlehem. A light shines in the darkness. We are not alone. God is not against us; he is with us.

So the darkness of hell throws everything it has at this light trying to snuff it out, beginning with Herod. But the darkness did not overcome it. Hell circled back by tempting the second Adam just as it tempted the first. “If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread.” But the second Adam remembered the commands, remembered the words, and remained obedient. “It is written” he said. The darkness did not overcome the light.

Hell circled back again and again, trying to entrap Jesus, get him to say something blasphemous, but the wisdom of God cannot be boxed in by man.

Hell doesn’t give up; never gives up. At Golgotha, when Jesus takes his last shallow breath, even the sun cannot shine; midday turns into night. It certainly *appears* the darkness has won. God hangs dead on a cross, and Satan is thinking, “By gum, I think we’ve done it.” But then comes the dawn of the third day. The light was so intense it knocked those soldiers right off their feet. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

God took the initiative we couldn’t have taken and reconciled himself to us through Christ. Still today, in Holy Baptism God takes the initiative. Long before we ever get around to choosing him, he chooses us. Light is born into our darkness. Paul wrote, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of the darkness’ made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Peter wrote, He has “called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). It’s his doing, not ours.

By grace he is restoring the vertical relationship, but he doesn’t quit there. He aims to fix the broken horizontal relationships too. He aches also when his children are estranged from one another. Therefore, already back in Bethlehem, he

starts bringing dissimilar people together: poor shepherds and wealthy magi. Shepherds following their sheep right near Bethlehem, and magi following the star all the way from Persia, Jews and Gentiles, disparate people coming to worship Jesus.

Still today, dissimilar people from around the world are gathering tonight to worship him, and there's room and welcome for them all, people who may have nothing else in common other than the light of Christ, but that is quite enough. We have a relationship with them, a fellowship, not like marbles in a bag, where there's little pixels of contact, but real fellowship, a oneness given us by God. 1 John 1, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another" (v. 7). If God is our Father, that makes us brothers and sisters, no longer strangers. Paul says together, we are the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).

Bethlehem showed little room or welcome for him, but in his heart there's all kinds of room and welcome for us. John 1, "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" (v. 11). This means whatever we've done, "So great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should called children of God!" (1 Jn. 3:1). Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (Jn. 6:37).

The one who said, "I am the light of the world" now says to us, "You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14). "Live" Paul says, "as children of light" (Eph. 5:7). Don't wallow in the darkness. Live as children of light. Don't be ashamed of the light. Don't be ashamed of him even as he is not ashamed of you. "No one lights a lamp and hides it under a bowl" Jesus said. Why would you do that? That would be foolish. "Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that it gives light to everyone in the house" (Mt. 5:15).

It's dark outside right now, which means even a soft light really stands out. That's both good news and bad, right? Nevertheless, Jesus said, "let your light shine" (Mt. 5:16).

One last thing. Soon Jesus will return in all glory. Soon will come the day when the most glorious light we've never seen will banish the darkness forever. Then we will live in the city which 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. On that day, we will stand before him in all his glory, not cower, we will stand and see

him face to face. And we will gather at table for the best of meats and the finest of wines. No one bursting into tears at that table, no one feeling left out or slighted, no one staggering out the door. Perfect fellowship with all the saints, and with Him.

Soon will come that day. Soon will come that glorious light. Amen.



