

The Star: A Journey to Christmas
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Today we are beginning a Christmas sermon series entitled The Star: A Journey to Christmas.

On the Christian calendar – this is the first Sunday of Advent. The word *advent* is a version of a Latin word which means “coming.” So, the weeks leading up to Christmas are a chance to look forward to our celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the light of the world.

The Journey to Christmas is really a journey to Christ. And it’s a journey that will explore the gifts delivered by Christ: hope, love, joy, and peace. Romans 15:13 says:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit!

We all need hope in the storms of life – and that hope comes through Jesus!
 We need fresh joy on our journey and that joy comes through Jesus!
 We need peace no matter what we’re facing and that peace comes through Jesus!

On the Jewish calendar we will soon be in the season called Hanukkah, which is the Jewish eight-day “festival of lights,” celebrated with nightly menorah lighting, special prayers and fried foods.

The Hebrew word Hanukah means “dedication,” and is so named because it celebrates the rededication of the Temple.

In the second century BC, the Holy Land was ruled by Greeks who tried to force the people of Israel to accept Greek culture and beliefs instead of belief in God and His Word. Against all odds, a small band of faithful Jews, led by Judah the Maccabee, defeated one of the mightiest armies on earth. They drove the Greeks from the land, reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and rededicated it to God.

When they wanted to light the Temple's Menorah (the seven-branched candlestick), they found only a single jar of oil that had escaped contamination by the Greeks. Miraculously, they lit the menorah and the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days, until new oil could be prepared under conditions of ritual purity. Hanukah celebrates this miracle of light.

What I want you to see is how important light is to this season of the year. Last year, Deb and I were driving home from our daughter’s house one night and made the mistake of driving the way that went by Prairie Lights.

There were lines at least a half-mile long in every direction. It's crazy how much time and money people spend to see Christmas lights. Can you imagine this season without lights? It's hard to do.

By the way - did you know that Christmas Lights are about Jesus? In the 1500's, the great reformer Martin Luther was walking home on a dark December night when he was struck by the beauty of the starlight coming through the branches of the evergreens around his home. He was so captivated by this, that he put an evergreen in his home and tied candles to it.

So, he started the tradition of lighted Christmas trees. Luther taught that the tree represented the love of God. The evergreen's color does not fade, just like God's love never fades. The lights represented the hope that Christ brought into the world. The Bible says that Jesus is the light of the world. So, when you look at a Christmas tree with lights – think of the love of God that sent Jesus to light the way to eternal life.

In ancient times, there was no electricity or lights like we have now. The only thing that could light the night was fire – through fire places and candles and oil lamps. There were no street lights or porch lights or any other kinds of lights. So, the people lived in darkness.

That didn't change until inventors like Thomas Edison came on the scene in the 1800's. And as electricity spread, America experienced a revolution. Light had come into the darkness and their lives were changed.

Of course, that wasn't the first time light had changed the world. In fact, light changed the world from the very beginning. We are told in Genesis 1:3-4 that in the beginning:

God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

From Creation, the Bible leads us through humanity's progression from the light of God's perfection to the darkness of man's fall into sin and then through centuries of waiting for the day when the Messiah would bring the light of restoration.

That day finally came—but not like anyone expected. Two thousand years ago - the incomparable, world-altering arrival of the true light of the world came to Bethlehem. It was a truly amazing night!

Before Jesus came to earth people were living in darkness – literally and spiritually. But when Jesus began His ministry – some of His first words were in Matthew 4:16

The people living in darkness have seen a great light.

In John 8:12 Jesus said,

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The main characters of the Christmas story show us the kinds of darkness people had to overcome. First, there was Joseph and Mary. They had to deal with the darkness of not understanding God's plan for them at first. When Mary was told she would have a child – she asked in Luke 1:34-38

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

When Joseph found out she was pregnant – he was also in the dark. How could the woman he loved have betrayed him like this? He was planning on leaving her, but then the lights came on when an angel told him in Matthew 1:20-21

Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.

Mary and Joseph were both in the dark until God showed them the light by speaking His word to them. And they chose to believe the word and obey the word no matter what it would cost them!

God overcome the darkness of misunderstanding in the minds of Mary and Joseph by His word. He spoke to them through dreams and angels and people. And God want to bring us out of the darkness of our misunderstandings and confusion the very same way – through His word! Psalm 119:105 says:

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

If you feel you are walking around in darkness – get in the Word and get a word from God and He will give you light to walk in!

Then, of course, there were the shepherds. These guys were definitely in the dark—literally. They were somewhere out in the fields in the wilderness at night watching over sheep. This was nothing new to them. They were used to dark nights. They must've had amazing views of the starry sky. But nothing would have prepared them for a sky full of angels. Can you imagine their surprise when an angel appeared in the sky and began telling them he had good news?

Luke 2:9-12 says:

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The shepherds didn't sit around talking about how crazy their angelic encounter was. They didn't shrug it off because they couldn't understand it. Instead, they immediately got up and went to see for themselves. Luke 2:15 tells us:

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Of course, the shepherds weren't supposed to go anywhere that night. They were supposed to stay in that dark field and watch the sheep—that was their job. But after they heard the angel announce the arrival of the Light of the World, nothing else mattered. They were filled with amazement and drawn to go see and experience what God was calling them to.

And God wants us to be so in awe of Him and His presence that nothing holds us back from seeking Him and spending time in His presence.

Later there were the wise men who encountered the light of a star and followed it in the night sky. Unlike the shepherds, the Wise Men were not surprised. These men studied the skies and the Bible tells us that they knew this star marked the birth of the king of the Jews.

The Star of Bethlehem has taken a central place in the Christmas story, but its mention in the Bible is very brief. The record of wise men from the East who followed a star is only mentioned in Matthew's Gospel account of Christ's coming. That star compelled the wise men to take a long, difficult journey to see and worship Jesus. Matthew 2:1-2 says:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."

You see, the star then and now is a guide that ultimately leads to Jesus, the light of the world.

What's also important to note is that along the way, the Wise Men came face-to-face with the darkness of evil. Maybe they thought everyone would be celebrating the momentous arrival of the Messiah.

But when they arrived in Jerusalem and inquired about this new king of the Jews, King Herod was not happy. He was threatened by the news of a new ruler, and he wanted to hold onto his power at all costs.

So, when Herod encountered the light of Christ, he tried to squelch it. He intended to get rid of any ruler who threatened his own power. Fear drove him to try to destroy the Savior of the world.

But when the wise men found Jesus, an angel warned them about Herod and sent them home by another route—away from Herod. So, the Wise Men had to make a choice: follow the light or give in to the fear of darkness. But the Wise Men chose to trust the Lord and they chose to side with the light and be filled with its wonder.

Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the Wise Men—these three different groups of people had three different experiences of darkness and light. Yet each of them allowed themselves to experience the blessing that comes from an encounter with the light.

So - what about you? Where do you find yourself on the journey? Are you in a place of emotional darkness—lonely, isolated, doubting, overwhelmed? Maybe like Mary and Joseph, you even feel that trusting God has led you to a tough place you can't understand.

If you are lonely or hurting this season, the light of Christmas is for you. The arrival of Jesus is a call to courage and a promise of hope and love. It is God placing His Son among us, with us. With the psalmist who said in Psalm 27:1, you can say:

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?

And you can trust the promise of Isaiah 42:16, which says:

I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.

If you feel trapped in darkness, the light of Christ is for you. Or maybe this Christmas Eve you find yourself busy or maybe even burned out from the hectic pace of the season. In spite of the many things you have to do, will you be like the shepherds and leave everything to follow the light to Jesus?

No matter what responsibilities you carry, He is waiting with this promise from Matthew 11:28-29:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Or maybe you identify more with the wise men. You've been watching and waiting and preparing for this season. But maybe you have you encountered a new fear or a new threat that has cast a shadow of darkness across your path. Are you willing to choose to continue your journey to experience the presence of Jesus?

Wherever you find yourself, I invite you into the light. I invite you to experience the wonder of the birth of the Savior.

The same God who spoke light into existence at Creation has sent His Son as the light of the world. As 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us:

For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

The darkness of our world and of our own lives does not hinder Jesus in any way—in fact, it is the very reason that He came to earth. Think about the star that the wise men followed. The psalmist put it beautifully in Psalm 19:1–4 which says:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

God's glory is seen in the stars. But the thing about stars is they can't be seen in the light. They are there, but we can't see them. In fact, they are seen best on the darkest of nights, when there is no moonlight, away from the lights of the city. The darker the setting, the brighter the starlight.

You might be in a dark time right now! Maybe you are overwhelmed by any number of struggles: financial stresses, relational dysfunctions, family issues. We've all been there at some time or another. We may be there now in some form or another. But let me encourage you—that's exactly where light shines brightest.

And we need to realize that darkness is not an issue for God! Psalm 139:12 says this about God:

It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to You; night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to You.

Did you get that? To God, darkness and light are the same.

God never experiences dark times!

God never wonders what to do next!

God always knows what to do next!

God always sees perfectly!

What is our darkest midnight is as bright as noonday to Him!

In fact, God does some of His best work in our darkness! Many major events in the Bible happened in the midst of darkness – from creation to the cross.

So - Don't miss the purpose of Christmas. Don't stay in the dark! It's not about what's under the tree. It's about the man who hung on the cross.

Don't miss the greatest gift you can ever receive. In history's greatest miracle, God became a human being. The King of King and the Lord of Lords chose birth in a stable and death on a cross so He could give us the light of salvation.

The Bible tells us that it was also a dark time for the people of Israel before Jesus showed up. They were desperate for a deliverer. Honestly, many of them thought God had forgotten them, especially as they lived under Roman oppression in the time of Herod.

Today we share that common experience of darkness and desperation. We live in a world full of darkness and fear and racism and division and sexual harassment and mass shootings. Nothing can rescue us except God. We need a deliverer!

And the beauty of the journey to Christmas is that we see, in what seems to be the darkest hour, God shows up. Into that great darkness an even greater star appears to light the way.

That give us hope, knowing that Jesus entered our darkness that first Christmas. That's why we celebrate Christmas. I want to close by asking if you have received the light of Christmas? Have you ever received Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

You might be in the dark right now – but I believe the light will come on!

Like Saul – you might be blinded by the light – but I believe God will give you 20/20 spiritual vision!

You might feel light years away from God – but He is here right now!

You might feel like you're at a dead end in life – but there is light at the end of the tunnel and that light is Jesus!

You might feel out like a light – but Jesus wants to turn on the light!

Will you say yes to Jesus?

Will you peer through the darkness of your life, no matter what that may be, and look for the glimmer of hope?

Will you step toward the light of Christ even if your vision is cloudy?