

Light in the Darkness

“The people walking in darkness has seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned,” (Isa. 9:2). Isaiah speaks these words into a world marked by fear, instability, and political anxiety. Darkness, in this prophetic vision, isn’t just the absence of light – it’s the lived experience of oppression, uncertainty, and waiting. People wonder whether God still sees them, whether the promises spoken long ago still matter in a world shaped by power, violence, and forgetting.

Into that darkness, Isaiah doesn’t proclaim a new policy, a philosophy, or a political scheme. He proclaims a Child. “For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders,” (Isa. 9:6a). The Promise of God doesn’t descend from a distance. It takes on flesh. It becomes vulnerable. God’s Salvation enters history not as an abstract idea – but as a Person. A small Baby – dependent, and fully human.

“And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” (Isa. 9:6b). These are titles of authority, yet Isaiah insists they will be fulfilled in a way in which no one expects. Luke’s Gospel tells us how. Luke 2:1-20 is the story of God’s Promise becoming embodied in the middle of political pressure, social vulnerability, exhaustion, and fear. Christmas doesn’t begin with power on display – it starts with Love made visible. Christmas teaches us from the very beginning that God’s love begins with those the world overlooks. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn to the second chapter of Luke’s Gospel with me. **Read Luke 2:1-20.**

God at Work in Ordinary Obedience

Luke opens the Christmas story not with angels singing praise, but with empire:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a Child, (Luke 2:1-5).

A census is about control. It reminds people who holds power, who counts, and who must move when commanded. Caesar says, “Jump!” and the people’s response must be, “How high?” or else they’ll find themselves hanging on crosses. Joseph and Mary do not choose Bethlehem. They are required to go. Their journey isn’t shaped by hope – it’s shaped by obligation. And yet, Luke quickly turns our attention away from Caesar and his decree, towards something the empire would never notice. “While they were there, the time came for the Baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn,

a Son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them,” (Luke 2:6-7).

No palace. No recognition. No comfort. Just a young woman giving birth far from home. The Savior of the world enters history not through Rome’s halls of power, but through the body of a poor, exhausted mother. Were Joseph and Mary acting in rebellion? Luke doesn’t frame them as revolutionaries. Their actions are quiet, practical, and deeply human. They’re trying to survive in the world.

They travel. They comply. They endure. Their faithfulness looks ordinary – almost invisible. Yet God works through that ordinariness. This is the joy of Christmas – not that everything goes right, but that God shows up anyways. Sacred things happen in small, humble places. A stable becomes holy ground. A feeding trough becomes a cradle. A tired couple become the center of God’s saving work.

So much could have gone wrong. A dangerous journey late in pregnancy. No place to stay. The physical risk of childbirth. The social shame surrounding Mary’s pregnancy. Luke offers no soft lighting, no gentle music. He simply tells the truth. The first Christmas begins in strain and uncertainty. Yet there’s still joy!

Joy

Christian joy, according to Luke’s Gospel, isn’t the denial of pain. It’s the recognition that God is present within it. That matters today, in a season when many people feel pressure to “perform” happiness. “Just be happy.” Sometimes you can’t! Political anxiety, financial stress, grief, and loneliness often feel sharper during Christmas and the season leading up to it.

The embodied promise of Christ tells us something very important. You don’t need power to be a part of God’s story. God doesn’t wait for perfect conditions or impressive credentials. God enters the world through people who are tired, vulnerable, and doing the best they can to just get by in the world.

The Church reflects this joy when it makes room for honesty. When it acknowledges that Christmas can be difficult. It’s okay to not be okay. Creating space for lament, remembrance, and quiet hope is not demonstrating a lack of faith or a failing faith. It is a display of faithfulness.

Consider the story of Bryce Shelton proposing to Paige Berdomas in June, 2025, while a tornado loomed behind them.¹ They are professional storm chasers. For them, joy didn’t come because the storm was gone, but because love chose to act anyway. In much the same way, God’s joy enters the world not once chaos passes, but rather, it shows up right in the middle of it.

The Prince Who Initiates Peace

Tonight’s reading from Isaiah gives us several names for the Child. “He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” (Isa.

¹ *A Couple’s Tornado proposal goes viral: How it Happened*, Retrieved 12/23/2025, at:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/humankind/2025/07/01/tornado-proposal-photo/84437311007/>

9:6b). The peace that Christ brings isn't passive calm. It's not quiet. Or the absence of conflict. It is peace that is made. Peace that is initiated. It's the *Shalom* peace of God that interrupts chaos.

"Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever," (Isa. 9:7). Isaiah's language is royal. Yet Jesus fulfills these titles in ways that overturn human expectations. He doesn't rule from a throne. He lies in a manger, and ultimately from the cross of Good Friday. Jesus doesn't control through force or manipulation. He transforms hearts and minds through His presence. Real power looks like care – not control.

The world associates power with domination – who commands, who coerces, who wins. But Jesus Christ coming that first Christmas night tells a different story. The Prince of Peace isn't born into privilege. He's born into vulnerability. Christmas shows us where to look for real peace. Not in strength that overwhelms, but in love that draws near.

Peace

The Texas Sharpshooter fallacy helps us understand this moment. A sharpshooter fires randomly, then draws a target afterward around the largest cluster of shots he's made to claim success. Isaiah does the opposite. He draws the target centuries – 700 or 800 years – in advance. And when Jesus arrives, He does not just hit the target – He redefines it. Peace isn't just about borders being secured or enemies being defeated. Now peace is about relationships being restored – between God and humanity, and among people themselves, all because of the work Jesus Christ has done!

If Jesus is truly the Prince of Peace, then His followers today are called to be initiators of peace as well. That calling is rarely comfortable. Peace requires presence in places of conflict. It requires listening, patience, courage, and humility. It means refusing to mirror the world's hunger for control, and instead practicing the care we see demonstrated by Christ in the Gospel record.

For the Church, generally speaking, it means being an uncompromising voice calling leaders all over the world to respect and value human dignity. To ensure that people everywhere are afforded basic human rights. For us, as a local church, this may mean engaging in unresolved local concerns. Standing alongside those who are marginalized here in Shelby County. Or learning how to witness publicly without abandoning gentleness. Peace isn't passive. It's practiced.

Choosing to Go and See

In Luke's Gospel, after the angels depart, the shepherds are left standing in the dark fields. The sky falls silent. The moment passes. And then comes hope – not as a feeling, but as a decision. "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about," (Luke 2:15). Hope moves feet. Hope risks

disappointment. Hope dares to believe that what has been promised might actually be true!

The shepherds lived on the margins of society. Their work was dirty. They were the rough and tumble crowd. Back in the 1970's Willie Nelson sang, "Mommas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys." If the song had been written 2000 years earlier, it would've been, "Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Shepherds."

Their presence was often unwanted. And God does something remarkable. He sends the first announcement of the Messiah not to priests and politicians, but to them. Even when the world forgets someone, God remembers.

Hope

Unlike us, the shepherds lived before hidden cameras and staged surprises. They would not have assumed a trick – but their belief still required courage. What they experienced was overwhelming. It was disruptive. And, can you imagine seeing the night sky filled with an angelic choir? It was hard for them to process, mentally and emotionally. Still, they chose hope. They went to see.

Today, hope works the same way. It is sustained by memory – by moments when God proved faithful to us before. It's strengthened by community. By stories passed down that remind us why belief is still reasonable. And it becomes real through action.

Hope without action remains abstract – a far off idea. Hope that acts becomes embodied. As a local church, choosing hope may mean committing to a long-standing concern that feels unsolvable. It may mean showing up again and again, at places like the Alpha Center, trusting that God is still at work among those the world has learned to ignore.

Love: Treasuring What God Is Doing

Luke records, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart," (Luke 2:19). Others are amazed. The shepherds proclaim. The community reacts. And Mary treasures. Amazement is immediate. Love is patient. Love holds meaning over time. Despite exhaustion, vulnerability, social risk, and unexpected visitors, Mary chooses reflection.

Love allows Mary to see God's work beyond the spectacle of the Nativity scenes we so often look upon this time of year. Luke gives us glimpses into Mary's thoughts and the shepherds' excitement, but Joseph remains silent. His absence invites reflection. Whose voices are heard today? Whose faithfulness remains unnoticed? The Church is called to listen carefully – to women, to the marginalized, to those whose quiet obedience sustains the community.

Not everyone who heard the shepherds' story responded with action. Amazement did not automatically lead to transformation. The Church must be attentive to the varied responses to the Good News. We need to recognize that discipleship grows slowly, and often quietly.

Living the Embodied Promise

Late theologian Howard Thurman once wrote:

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born;
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms,
green fruit.
Such is the growing edge!
It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung,
The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.
This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,
The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And men have lost their reason; the source of confidence
When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.
The birth of a Child – life's most dramatic answer to death –
This is the Growing Edge Incarnate,
Look well to the Growing Edge!²

Mary stands in a long line of women who found ways to nurture faith, build community, and move forward despite difficult circumstances. She models what faithful reflection looks like – taking in reality, pausing for discernment, consulting her people, and stepping forward with wisdom.

God's promise isn't distant. It is embodied. We see His promise clearly, visibly, in Jesus Christ. Joy enters exhaustion. Peace confronts chaos. Hope chooses to act. Love treasures what God is doing.

Christmas reminds us where God shows up. The first Christmas also shows us who God chooses first. God's love begins with those the world overlooks. And because that is true, there is room in God's story for all people. For all of us. Merry Christmas, New Hope!

Prayer: Gracious God, We thank You for Your promise made flesh in Jesus Christ. Meet us in our weariness, our fear, and our hope. Teach us to choose joy without denying pain, to practice peace through care rather than control, to act in hope when the way is unclear, and to treasure Your work among us with love. May our lives bear witness to Your embodied promise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

² Howard Thurman, "The Growing Edge," *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, 4th Ed., (Friends United Press: Richmond, IN, 2011), page 27.