

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on John 8:12 at Victory of the Lamb on December 24, 2015.

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

"Only Christ Can Deliver Us From the Darkness"

Merry Christmas! And welcome to our first Christmas Eve service here in our brand new ministry center. We have much to celebrate being here tonight, but nothing greater than the birth of Jesus Christ who once said: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).*

If you're here for the first time tonight you may have noticed that we've got some wonderful lights in this brand new building. There is a beautiful hoop light in the lobby right inside the entrance. There are energy efficient, dimmable, LED lights here in the sanctuary. Up here where I'm standing there are spotlights and even special LED color wash stage lights. Should the power go out I'm also confident that our emergency lights will come on and shine in the darkness. Even the City of Franklin inspector agrees which is in itself a wonderful thing to celebrate tonight!

But imagine with me that you were living in the year 1879. When darkness falls, your only source of light is from fire—whether candles, lanterns, or oil lamps. So night was dark, very dark. And this was normal. So you probably would have been curious when you heard that Thomas Edison was giving the first public lightbulb demonstration at his home in Menlo Park, New Jersey. If you were a well-to-do New Yorker, you would have boarded a Pennsylvania Railroad train on December 31, 1879, and expectantly ridden the twenty miles to sleepy Menlo Park. Dressed in your New Year's finest, you would have disembarked the train and walked past the dozen or so houses in the tiny town, gazing open-mouthed into the cold night sky. It wasn't the stars you were marveling at, but the glowing lights on lampposts lining the street to Edison's home. It was a completely foreign sight and one that filled you with amazement.

Then a few years later came the 1893 World's Fair. In Chicago, President Grover Cleveland pushed a button and illuminated nearly 100,000 incandescent lamps. Lights lit the buildings. Searchlights lit up the sky, and even the fountains were lit with colored lights. Can you imagine what that was like for the 27 million people at the fair who had never seen electric light like this before? Wonder must have overwhelmed everyone's senses. And as electricity spread, awestruck Americans experienced a revolution. Light had come into the darkness, and their lives were changed.

Well friends, this wasn't the first time that light entered our world, created a sense of wonder, and changed people's lives forever. Almost 2,000 years before electricity, light bulbs, and the World's Fair in Chicago... another light appeared in Bethlehem to pierce the darkness of this world's endless night.

A group of ordinary people like us were the first to have their lives changed by this light. They were shepherds. They were somewhere out in the fields of the Judean wilderness watching over sheep. They were used to dark nights. A full moon would have made a bright night, and I'm sure they were quite used to enjoying amazing views of the starry night sky.

But nothing would have prepared them for a sky full of angels. Can you imagine their surprise when a shining angel appeared in the sky and began telling them he had good news of great joy for all people? And then a whole choir of angels lit up the sky and began singing, “Glory to God in the highest!” The shepherds were awestruck. The Bible actually says they were “terrified” (Luke 2:9).

Yet the shepherds didn’t sit around bewildered. Instead, they immediately went to go see for themselves what the angels sang about—the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise of a Savior which God first made after the Fall as the darkness of sin spread across all God’s previously perfect creation. 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 hadn’t planned on going anywhere that night. (Maybe you didn’t really plan on coming to church tonight either except that somehow you made it here and that’s great!) I mean they were supposed to stay in that dark field and watch the sheep—that was their job. But when shining angels announced the arrival of the Messiah, they were overwhelmed with wonder. Nothing else mattered. They were filled with amazement and drawn to go see a Light even greater than what they had seen in the sky. So they dropped everything to go see the Light of the World wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying helpless in a manger.

I know, that doesn’t sound all that impressive, does it? From an earthly perspective, it sounds a bit anticlimactic. This tiny, fragile baby is the Light of the World? This is how God is going to deal with the darkness of sin that has impacted all of human history? Doesn’t God understand how deep and thick and smothering this darkness is?

I mean you know how dark it is out there in our world, don’t you? This past year terrorists have slaughtered many innocent people and stirred up fear all over the globe from the sand of Syria to the streets of Paris to places closer to home like San Bernadino. Across our land, long-cherished family values are eroding at lightning quick speed. Open sin of all sorts is not only defended but often glorified. We live in a society in which human life itself has become cheap and expendable, with murder rates skyrocketing in our streets, racial tensions being exploited by politicians, and unborn children being murdered in the womb for convenience and then their body parts harvested for financial gain.

I’m not trying to cause you to feel a sense of despair tonight on Christmas Eve. I’m simply calling to mind the very reason why we still need Christmas. And the reason we still need Christmas is the very same reason we still need Christ. Because ultimately we don’t just need a distraction tonight away from the darkness out there in the world (you can find endless amounts of that on YouTube). What we need is a Savior who can actually deliver us from the darkness of sin, death, and the power of the devil.

The good news tonight is that that is exactly what Christmas is all about. It’s exactly what Jesus Christ came to do. It’s the reason he became fully human. We didn’t just need God to look down on us in our darkness. We needed him to come down into it. To live in it. Breathe in it. Shine the light of divine/human perfection into it in the way that only the Son of God could.

A friend of mine got me thinking this week about why we wish people a 'Merry Christmas' since after all, for a lot of people, Christmas isn't always "merry" is it? I mean Christmas often comes *with* unpleasant surprises. With undesirable family problems. With troubling financial worries. With the heavy weight of loneliness or depression.

And sometimes Christmas comes *without* the merry holiday scenes that are featured in commercials. Without the festive family gatherings. Without the good times with friends. Without the time off that some of us expect. Without the good health that you once had. How does saying, "Merry Christmas" drive away the darkness for the grieving widow... or the caregiving spouse... or the bed-ridden man?

Only with Christ who came to actually deliver us from the darkness. Only when we realize that even if not every Christmas is going to be a *merry* Christmas, yet through Jesus Christ every Christmas can be *blessed* Christmas. Blessed because Jesus Christ came as *the light of the world*. And he promises, "*Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12).

That baby boy born in Bethlehem didn't come just to grace the cover of Hallmark cards. He didn't come just to add a bit of sentimentality to social media posts. He was born to save. To redeem. To forgive. To deliver us from the darkness and our sin and the despair of our own imminent death one day. So he was born to live and breathe in a real, human body and experience real human problems just like us. He was born to suffer the bitter agony of death on the cross, taking upon himself the punishment for our sins in full, in order to set us completely free from the fear of death by his resurrection victory on Easter.

Now those are real blessings. For real people like you and me. With real sins. And real sufferings because of sin. And real fears. And real struggles. Those are real blessings that shine through the darkness, through the troubles and miseries of life, that shine straight into the soul. That's why only Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, can actually deliver us from darkness.

In wrapping up tonight, I have a confession to make. I didn't get around to putting up Christmas lights outside this year. And almost every house around us has beautiful lights on display. Some have lights high up perfectly placed along their pitched roofs. Some have all their trees and shrubs lighted. Some have lighted snowmen and reindeer and candy canes. Some even have those new LED lights that look giant blankets for the whole house. Have you seen those? They're kind of cool I think.

But outside, our house looks dark. Yet friends, I can guarantee you that this has no bearing on what we experience inside because inside our home or in our hearts we inside we have the light of Christ. His light drives out gloom and sadness. His light causes fear to fade away. His light promotes forgiveness, joy and peace.

And here's the thing...the same can be true for you because Jesus invites you to welcome him as your Savior too and his light still shines in the darkness. He continues to call out to us all tonight through his holy word and says, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12).

Friends, I don't know what you're feeling tonight. Maybe this Christmas Eve you find yourself busy, burned out, or even bitter about the hectic pace of the season. Maybe you feel lonely, hurting, or afraid. Maybe you came here tonight on the verge of losing all hope or like you've lost the ability to wonder any more like a child. Maybe you're in a place of emotional darkness. I don't know. But I do know this. Jesus Christ came to deliver you and me from darkness. The light of Christmas is for you is because Jesus Christ came for you. Consider...the darkness of our world didn't prevent Jesus from coming here. In fact, it was the very reason that He came. Amen.

We pray. Almighty God, you made Christmas to shine with the brightness of the true light. Grant that as we have known on earth the wonder of that light, we may also behold him in all his glory in the life to come; through your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.