



FIRST LESSON  
ISAIAH 9:2-7

PSALM  
PSALM 96

SECOND LESSON  
TITUS 2:11-14

GOSPEL LESSON  
ST. LUKE 2:1-20

PRAAYER OF THE DAY

ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU MADE THIS HOLY NIGHT SHINE WITH THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE TRUE LIGHT. GRANT THAT HERE ON EARTH WE MAY WALK IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS' PRESENCE AND IN THE LAST DAY WAKE TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF HIS GLORY; THROUGH YOUR ONLY SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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*Living in God's amazing grace*

Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord; Christmas Eve  
Date: December 24, 2006  
Sermon Title: The People in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is so good to see you all here this evening. Thank you for making the effort to come out tonight and celebrate the birth of Christ with us at Saint Peter. Three days ago, it wasn't entirely certain that this room would be full. For a little while I wondered if it would be me, and my banjo, and whoever lives close enough to walk to worship. But God is good, and so are the hard-working people in the Denver area who clear our streets and make travel safe. I am very glad that the snow has been moved to the side, the roads have been (for the most part) cleared off, and you all could be with us this evening.

It has been a challenging week, hasn't it? We've seen the pictures flashed on television news, and in the daily papers. Vacationers in the mountains sat still for hours on I-70, trying to get back home to Denver. (Lynn Sherpe told me that her commute from church to home, which usually takes fifteen minutes or so, took four hours on Wednesday afternoon.) Cars and trucks slid off the roadway and spent the night in the ditch along freeways and highways. Homeowners invested a good share of Thursday digging out their driveways and sidewalks. I talked with a woman who lives near the church, whose 84-year old mother was traveling here from South Carolina for Christmas, and she had to spend two nights on the floor at DIA. Our Colorado weather affected airplane traffic throughout the country, and caused innumerable headaches for people with plans to travel during Christmastime this year. Stores were closed, costing them money, and putting a crunch on last minute Christmas shoppers. When Mother Nature rears her head in Colorado – especially when it is during the Christmas holiday – it is challenging, to say the least.

My family has had its own trials this past week. Before the blizzard hit, we had contractors in our home, tearing up the tile floor in our kitchen and preparing to replace it with hardwood. Unfortunately, the job foreman made a bad call, and tore up the linoleum in the kitchen without having it tested first. It turned out to be 85% asbestos, creating the strong possibility that our kitchen, and possibly the rest of the house, had been contaminated. The rest of my family was in Arizona, preparing to celebrate Christmas with Betsy's parents, so it didn't affect them directly. But I had to leave the house, and all its contents, with just the clothes on my back. Nadine and Andy Nakatani were gracious enough to make a bed available to me in their home until I could get our home tested. As it turned out, everything was O.K. But because of the storm it took until late Friday for a technician to make that determination. So add to the list of those who faced a particular challenge this week a homeless pastor, and the Nakatani family, who had to put up with me a good bit longer than they first imagined.

It is interesting to see how people respond when situations become difficult. There has been no end of unhappy people complaining on the news shows the past few days. The Highway Department didn't clear the streets off quickly enough. The airport didn't have sufficient accommodations for stranded travelers. There weren't enough rental cars or hotel rooms available. It was too hard to get to the grocery store, or to do any Christmas shopping. Some even complained about the snow – as if it was a surprise to them that this kind of weather can hit Denver from time to time.

On the other hand, there were others who seemed to take it all in stride. The 84-year old woman who was stranded at the airport talked about what a great adventure it

was. She was offered a glass of wine by one of the merchants, and ended up playing card games with strangers late into the night.

Truth is, what we experienced this past week, was little more than an inconvenience. We may have missed an appointment or two, and we may not have gone as far overboard with Christmas shopping as we had planned to. But we were tucked safely into our homes. Most of us had electricity. We were warm and had enough food stashed away to hold us over until it was safe to travel again. For many of us, it actually turned out to be a well-deserved vacation from the chaotic pace of life; a fun time of hanging out at home with family.

But I am aware of others who have had it so much more difficult than that lately. There are times when life becomes a struggle, and there is a darkness that overtakes people in those kinds of times that is palpable. Here in our congregation, a number of families have been dealing with the failing health of a grandmother or a grandfather. When a loved one is suffering like that, it is so hard. You want to be able to do something, but can't. You wish for the situation to get better, but it doesn't. It is as if the pain of that person's suffering hangs over your head like a cloud, and makes the world just a bit darker.

The security we used to take for granted at work is no longer a reality for many of us. Just a couple of weeks ago, a large company announced plans to let a number of their employees go at the end of the year. I know a couple of individuals who were in danger of losing their jobs because of that drawdown, and it was hard for them to prepare for Christmas. Plans that had been in place for weeks were put on hold. They weren't able to be as generous with their giving as they had expected to be. As the world around them focused on merriment and good cheer, they struggled to not be overcome by their concerns about the future. It is as if that kind of uncertainty hangs over your head like a cloud, and makes the world just a bit darker.

When death comes, it is often difficult. It is especially challenging when it happens during the Christmas holiday season. We lost my dad's mother at Christmastime when I was a boy, and I still remember how hard that was. This past week, a couple in our congregation received word about the unexpected death of their 29-year old grandson. It has been a devastating loss to them. Family members have been trying to get to the Denver area and gather for a funeral. When others are convening family get-togethers to exchange gifts and sing Christmas Carols, this family is coming together to mourn the loss of one they love so deeply. It is as if the pain of that loss hangs over your head like a cloud, and makes the world just a bit darker.

There are any number of challenges, like these, that can cause a certain darkness to come into our lives. Sometimes we get hit by multiple challenges at the same time. When that happens, we experience a darkness that is real; that is painful; that can overwhelm us.

But as Christians, we have hope. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say: "Pastor, I don't know how people without faith get through these kinds of difficulties." And it is true: Jesus Christ is the light that shines into the darkness of our lives, and allows us to survive – even to thrive – when the going gets difficult. Some people reflect on life and conclude that when things are going well, it is a sign of God's power and blessing. But we reflect on life and realize that it is in our deepest times of darkness that the light of Christ shines most brightly. Tomorrow morning, when this wreath is lit again, we'll hardly be able to see its flame. But in the darkness of this evening, the Christmas Candle shines more brightly than it ever has.

The Prophet Isaiah knew that was a powerful promise for faithful people. He spoke some 700 years before Jesus was born, in a particularly dark time for ancient Israel. Isaiah offered them the hope of God's promise. He said: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." They trusted in that light, and found strength in God, during a time when their very existence was hanging in the balance.

No matter what difficulties we face in life – from small inconveniences like the effects of a winter storm in Colorado, to the loss of someone we love dearly – no matter what difficulties we face, there is good news. Jesus is "Immanuel" – which means God with us. When we find ourselves surrounded by darkness, Jesus is God with us, accompanying us and supporting us through any and every time of need.

This evening is a wonderful evening – and I am so glad that you are all here with us. Some of you look pretty familiar to me. I see you most every Sunday. Others of you I look forward to seeing each Christmas, and perhaps at Easter as well. But as this year draws to a close, and another is about to begin, let me offer to each of you this invitation. Why not resolve, in 2007, to spend time each week with God’s people in worship? Don’t wait until next Easter or until next Christmas. We’re here every Sunday. And we’d love to have you here with us. And I’ll make you this promise: by making your faith, and your participation in a faith community, a part of your regular daily life, you too can have the strength and courage that comes from knowing that Jesus is with you at all times. You too can know that light that pushes back all the darkness in our lives, and allows us to live with hope and joy.

A merry Christmas to you all. As Christ was born in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago, may he be born anew in our hearts and lives today – in a way that sheds light on our darkness, and fills our hearts with hope and joy. Amen.

On that first Christmas Day, it was an army of angels who sang songs of joy at the Savior’s birth. Let’s remember their song, and sing with them. The words for “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” are printed on page 6 of your worship folders. Let’s stand together as we sing this old favorite Christmas Carol.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 22, 2006)

Gospel Lesson (English): <sup>i</sup>

<sup>2.1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. <sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” <sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Link to: [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar\\_for\\_2001.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar_for_2001.html) for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

<sup>ii</sup> St. Luke 2:1-20, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America)

## Gospel Lesson (Greek):

2.1 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πάσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην. 2 αὕτη ἀπογραφή πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου. 3 καὶ ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν. 4 Ἀνέβη δὲ καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐκ πόλεως Ναζαρέθ εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ ἣτις καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ, διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριάς Δαυίδ, 5 ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένη αὐτῷ, οὖση ἐγκύω. 6 Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν, 7 καὶ ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον, καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν φάτνῃ, διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι. 8 Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες καὶ φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποίμνην αὐτῶν. 9 καὶ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς καὶ δόξα κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν. 10 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος μὴ φοβέσθε, ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ἣτις ἐστὶ παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, 11 ὅτι ἐτέχθη ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὃς ἐστὶν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυίδ. 12 καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν τὸ σημεῖον, εὐρήσετε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ. 13 καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἄγγέλῳ πλήθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανοῦ αἰνούντων τὸν θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων 14 δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας. 15 Καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἀπήλθον ἀπ' αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ ἄγγελοι, οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους διέλθωμεν δὴ ἕως Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονός ὃ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. 16 καὶ ἦλθον σπεύσαντες καὶ ἀνεύραν τὴν τε Μαριὰμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ 17 ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου. 18 καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς 19 ἡ δὲ Μαριὰμ πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς. 20 καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνούντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πάσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς.<sup>iii</sup>

## First Lesson (English):

<sup>9.2</sup> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup> You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup> For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup> For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup> For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> St. Luke 2:1-20, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart)

<sup>iv</sup> Isaiah 9:2-7, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America)