

24 December 2009
Christmas Eve

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Love and Light of God”

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, His first words were “Let there be light.” And there was light. And ever since, man has been creating darkness. The darkness of sin and death. From Adam and Eve down to our day and age today. We may be getting more advanced in many ways, with space travel and exploration, the internet and ipods, medical technology and amazing discoveries - but we are not getting better.

Look around. War and hatred. Crime and negligence. Greed and lust. But don't just look *around*, look also in your own heart. What darkness is lurking there? What shameful sin you want no one else to know? What sin you've successfully hidden all year? What bitterness, anger, resentment, or hurt are causing love and forgiveness not to be given, but to die?

Tonight we heard from the prophet Isaiah about ***the people walking in darkness***. That is not only a description of the people in Isaiah's day, it is a good description of men in every age, including you and me. We live and walk in the darkness of sin and death. Gifts and trees and decorations and carols may help us forget about those things for a while, but they come back. They always come back. Sometimes with a vengeance. Sometimes, right in the middle of our holiday.

But Isaiah wasn't giving us bad news tonight, but good news! For while it is true that we are the people walking in darkness, Isaiah says that ***the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them a light shined. . . . For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.***

Tonight, this is what we celebrate. That into the darkness of our world of sin and death, has come a light. A great light! A light to overcome the darkness and save us from sin and death. And this light is the child born this night; the son given to us this night. The very Son of God in human flesh and named Jesus. Tonight, with the birth of Jesus, God's “Let there be light” sounds forth once again, that into the darkness of our hearts may shine the light of forgiveness and life.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this, says Isaiah.

Yes, the zeal of the Lord *for you*. For no matter who you are or what you have done, the Lord of all, the Creator of all things, the King of the universe, loves you. He

dearly loves you, more than you know or can imagine. And so has from the beginning planned for your salvation.

It is as we heard tonight: after our first parents fell and brought sin and darkness into the world, our Lord wasted no time, but promised a Saviour.

When he told Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the Lord stayed Abraham's knife-wielding hand - for it would *not* be Abraham's son slain on an altar for salvation, but God's own Son on the altar of the cross.

When the nation of Israel was reduced to a stump because of its sin, the Lord promised a branch would grow again - one ***from the house and lineage of David*** would come and restore God's people again, providing forgiveness and peace.

And God did not forget His promise. No, Luke says: ***It came to pass***. It happened. In the midst of real life and taxes and troubles, ***a child is born, a son is given***. And ***they wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger***. And if He looks not great, or that the glory of the angels outshines Him, it is only because the greatness of His light is hidden in human flesh. Hidden, in love, so that we may see and behold Him. For if He did not hide His glory, truly, we would be ***sore afraid*** of Him. Sore afraid in our sin.

But He comes not to frighten, but bids us - like the shepherds - to come to Him, that we may see ***the goodness and loving kindness of God***. The goodness and loving kindness of His light which has come not just to expose our darkness and sin, but to scatter the darkness and take our sin away. To take our sin away by putting it on Himself. To be our substitute under death on the cross. To be, as John said, ***the propitiation*** - or, the atoning sacrifice - ***for our sins***. That they shame us no more. That they separate us from God no more. That they burden us no more. That the darkness of the sin and death in your heart be overcome but His life and light.

And truly, ***the zeal of the Lord of hosts has done this*** for you! For as Titus told us tonight, ***“when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”*** He saved us, He saved *you*, when all His work done for you - His life, His death, His resurrection, His atonement, His forgiveness and salvation - when He gave it all to you in the washing of Holy Baptism. In those Spirit-filled waters, His birth became not just a story, but *your* story. And He became not just a Saviour, but *your* Saviour. That you be reconciled to God and live a new life. Walking no longer in the darkness of sin and death, but walking in the light of His love.

For tonight we see love. True love. The love of God in human flesh. Tonight we look

with the eyes of faith upon our Saviour in the manger, that seeing Him in the manger, we may also see Him on the cross. And that seeing Him on the cross, we may see Him on the altar - the same body and blood born for you, died for you, risen for you, and now given to you, for the forgiveness of your sins.

So we celebrate much more than a birth this night - we celebrate a Saviour. A Saviour for whom there was no room for His birth, but who by His death provides room for us in Heaven.

A Saviour who had no sin bears our sin, so that we who have no life be raised to life with Him.

And a Saviour who was visited by shepherds, who is now our Good Shepherd, caring for us through the trials and troubles and struggles of life, and carrying us in Himself *through the valley of the shadow of death* to life everlasting.

Tonight, this is our joy. Our joy in word and song and candlelight. The joy of faith. That we ***people who walked in darkness have seen a great light . . .*** The light no darkness can overcome. ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.*** The Son of God born a son of man, that we sons of men might be sons of God.

So *Joy to the World*, and ***Glory to God in the highest***, for in Jesus, we are right with God again. In Jesus, there is ***peace on earth*** and ***good will toward men***.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.