

Incarnation: Light of the World

**Isaiah 9:2-7
John 1:1-5, 9-14**

See the Light; be the light.

A sermon preached by
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What is it that lights up your life in this season? There is so much, right? Being with family, giving and receiving presents, looking at Christmas lights, all the decorations, the music of the season, Christmas movies, church services—all are experiences of light. Sometimes it's the things we do for others that bring the most light—making food for somebody, comforting someone who is grieving during the holidays, or even stuffing some money in the Salvation Army kettle at WalMart. It's all good stuff.

You're probably here tonight because you know the best thing about Christmas. You know what it's all about. We've known for 58 years at least, because that's how long we have been watching the Charlie Brown Christmas special. You know the scene. Charlie Brown has picked out a scrawny little Christmas tree for the kids' play, and everyone has made fun of him and laughed at him. In desperation, he cries out, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Linus Van Pelt steps up and says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." He steps to center stage and says, "Lights, please." The spotlight shines on Linus as he recites from the King James Version, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not,'" and at that point Linus significantly drops his security blanket, because we truly do not need to be afraid. "For behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

Then Linus picks up his security blanket and walks past Charlie Brown and says, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."¹

That's what Christmas is all about, what we have been calling the Incarnation. It's the amazing fact that God so loved the world that God became human, a real person, a tiny baby, born in a stable in Bethlehem. It's the amazing fact that split human history in two.

In the Bible, there are four biographies of Jesus of Nazareth—four Gospels—and each of them take a different approach to the Incarnation. The Gospel of Mark, probably the first written, does not mention the birth of Jesus at all.

Luke tells the most familiar story from the perspective of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is Mary who receives the message from the angel that she will bear the Son of God, and he will be a king in the line of David, the greatest King of Israel. Luke has the angels announce to the shepherds that the baby lying in the manger is the Savior, their Messiah and Lord.

Matthew tells the story differently, in that he focuses on the experience of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Joseph hears the angel, too, telling him not to divorce the pregnant Mary, but to name her child Jesus—which means “God saves”—because he will save his people from their sins. Jesus is Emmanuel, an ancient prophetic name which means “God is with us.”

But then John, the last Gospel written, expands our understanding of Jesus beyond the history and prophecy of Israel. John points to the cosmic significance of this baby. His history goes back to the beginning of time, to the creation of the world. He was in the beginning with God. He is the Word, a Greek philosophical term that means the creative force of God. This baby is the incarnation of the power that created the world. Life itself came into being through him, and he is the Light of all people. Wow! All of a sudden, the precious story of the 8-pound, 6-ounce newborn infant Jesus in the manger is taken to a whole new level. *This is what Christmas is all about: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”*² Incarnation.

Jesus as the Light of the World has all kinds of Biblical foundation, from beginning to end. In the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis, the first thing made by the Word of God was light: “*Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.*”³ At the very end of the story, in the Book of Revelation, the last thing God does is to light up the world with the glory of Christ: “*There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*”⁴

When people in the Bible talk about experiencing God, they often talk about light. The Psalmist says, “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*”⁵ Our prophet Isaiah today 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.*”⁶ God at work!

Jesus even described himself in this way, and gave those of us who believe in him a promise. He said, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*”⁷ In Jesus, we do not have to be afraid of the dark any more, because he is the Light of the world.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Incarnation*, says, “This is the point of Christmas. It is the celebration of light piercing our darkness, God’s light coming to us to enlighten our lives. We need not fear that we will stumble or become lost because we are no longer trying to find our way in the dark; we have the light of Christ by which we walk.”⁸

Light is a great metaphor for God because light is a source of warmth. The light of the sun warms our world and our backs, even on a cold day. The love of God warms our hearts and makes us happy like a sunny day.

Light is a source of sight. When you come upon a dark place, you need light to find your way. I am so glad that I carry a flashlight with me all the time now on my phone. When I lose something in a dark place, or when I can't see the way in front of me, the light is a comfort. In Jesus, God is with us to light up the dark places of life and show us the way forward.

Light is a source of security. If you want to keep the bad guys away from your house, what do you do? You put up lights! A well-lighted house is safer than a house shrouded in darkness. As John's Gospel says, "*This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light.*"⁹ The Light of the World gives us the security of knowing that God has our lives in his loving hands, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

We are in serious need of light today. The world as we know it is in a very dark place, as it was on that first Christmas when the light of Jesus came into the world. Then people struggled with poverty, sickness, and death, political oppression and religious corruption. We still have all of that, plus the devastation of war, hatred and prejudice against those who are not like us, and a climate that is slowly becoming uninhabitable. Frankly, it has been difficult to light the Advent candles this year—and not just because the wick got stuck in the wax. Can we really light the candles and expect hope, joy, love, and peace?

The little town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born is only 46 miles from Gaza. It is in the Palestinian West Bank. Normally, thousands of pilgrims come to Manger Square every year to celebrate Christmas. But this year, because of the war between Israel and Hamas, Christmas has been canceled. The Christian leaders in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Jordan have declared that there are to be no "unnecessarily festive" celebrations. Small religious services will be held, but for the first time in many years, the streets of Bethlehem will be dark.¹⁰

But it is never so dark that we cannot hope for the light. One of my favorite Christmas stories is a true story that seems appropriate to retell this year. On Christmas in 1914, the armies of Britain and Germany were facing off in France at the beginning of World War I. The war had only been going for about five months, but it was already miserable. The opposing armies were huddled in trenches within shouting distance of one another. The winter was cold, and to a man every soldier would have preferred to be home.

Suddenly, the British soldiers heard a familiar tune, but the words were in a foreign tongue:

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht! Alles schläft, einsam wacht
Nur das traute hochheilige Parr,
Holder Knabe mit lockigem Haar,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.*¹¹

Realizing that the Germans were singing Christmas carols, the British came up out of their trenches and greeted their enemies. The Germans joined them in "No Man's Land" between the bunkers. The soldiers who had been shooting at each other exchanged

trinkets, showed photographs of their families, and decorated little trees. Someone produced a ball, and a football game broke out. They also had the opportunity to bury their dead without the fear of getting shot in the process. The truce spread up and down the trenches and eventually involved 100,000 British and German troops. It lasted for about 24 hours, until the commanders ordered the soldiers back into the trenches, and the hostilities began again.¹²

By the next Christmas, the war had become so bloody and bitter, there was never a truce again. But for a moment, everything had been possible: peace in the midst of conflict, love for your enemies, joy in spite of pain and grief, hope for a world without war.

This is our moment of truce today. God has called a cease-fire. For the moment, we can put away all the conflicts, the anxiety, the sadness, and the pain, as we gather in wonder around the manger in Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass. In the moment, we can feel the hope, love, joy, and peace that God gives us through this child. We'll be back in the battle soon enough.

This is our challenge today. The Light of the World has come. See the Light. Be the light. Live your lives to embody the life of the Light of the World. Be a little Christ to all you meet. Be the peace that calms a conflict. Be the love that shares the unconditional affection of God with the lost and lonely. Be the joy that lifts someone out of the trench of grief and sadness. Be the hope that saves someone from despair. Give your lives to shine the light and dispel the darkness, as Jesus taught us, "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*"¹³

That's what it's all about. The Light has come; the darkness cannot overcome it. He is the King of all nations. He is the Savior of the world. He is Emmanuel, God with us, now and forever. Let's have supper—the Lord's Supper—and share the light. That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

¹ Charles M. Schulz, directed by Bill Melendez, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (United Features Syndicate, 1965).

² John 1:14.

³ Genesis 1:3f.

⁴ Revelation 22:5.

⁵ Psalm 27:1.

⁶ Isaiah 9:2.

⁷ John 8:12.

⁸ Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 130.

⁹ John 3:19-21.

¹⁰ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/november/bethlehem-christmas-cancelled-israel-gaza-jordan-christians.html>.

¹¹ "Silent Night, Holy Night," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #239.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-real-story-of-the-christmas-truce>.

¹³ Matthew 5:16.