

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

The Light dawns in our darkness.

A sermon preached by
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I have a very important question for you this morning. Did you get all your Christmas movies in? Did you have time to see all your favorite holiday stories? Everyone has their favorites, I suppose. Top on my list would be “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Story.” I almost know them by heart, but I always like to see them over Christmas if I can. Carey and Abby are big fans of the “Santa Clause” movies. We watch those every year. Some people are fans of the Hallmark Christmas movies or the Grinch or “Christmas Vacation.” It takes all kinds.

The wonderful thing about Christmas movies is not that they are excellent cinema from a critical standpoint, but that they touch us somewhere in the heart and bring us joy. The fact that we have seen them before—or ten times before—does not diminish our enthusiasm for watching them over and over again.

The Christmas Story of the Wise Men—in fact, the whole Christmas Story—functions the same way. From the announcement of the angel to the visit of the Magi, we love this story. It touches us someplace deep inside. It brings us joy. And it doesn’t matter how many times we hear the story or see it acted out by cute children in a Christmas pageant, it never gets old. We look forward to the re-telling every year. Today we are telling—yet again—the story of the Wise Men who came seeking the newborn King of Israel.

The meaning of the story is simple. The Wise Men were looking for the light. They had seen an unusual star and had followed it until it led them to Bethlehem, where they found the baby Jesus. The light is a symbol of hope, a sign of glory, an indication of the presence of God. Throughout history, God’s people have always looked for the light.

The prophet Isaiah—the third prophet to go by that name—was coming out of a dark time in the history of Israel. The nation had been defeated and devastated by the Babylonian Empire. Practically every productive citizen had been carried away into exile in Babylon for 70 years. But then God turned history around. A new ruler, Cyrus of Persia, took the place of the Babylonians. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. It was a time of light and glory and joy. Isaiah’s heart was so full he had to proclaim: *“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen*

upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”¹

Five centuries later, the Wise Men encountered the darkness of the murderous King Herod. Innocently, they came into Jerusalem with a question, “*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.*”² Herod was gripped by fear and tried to manipulate the Wise Men into helping him find this new rival for his power: “*Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.*”³

The Wise Men left the king’s palace and looked again for the light. The star led them to Bethlehem, to the house where Joseph and Mary and Jesus were staying. When they found the child, they were overwhelmed with joy, and they knelt down and worshipped. Then they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, gifts that were symbolic of the royalty, the divinity, and the sacrificial death of Jesus.

When this boy had become a man, he taught his followers, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*”⁴ And the Gospel of John testifies, “*in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*”⁵ This is the story of the people of God. Our God is a God of light, and we are looking for the light, because the light of God gives us power to overcome the darkness of this world.

We still look for the light today. Sometimes we feel surrounded by the darkness, especially in the events of this past year. Death, disease, disaster, poverty, hunger, injustice, and conflict—2020 is a year nobody wants to live over. We need a star to guide us today. Out of the fog of despair, out of the cloud of suffering, we need to see the light. As the Psalmist asked, “*From where will my help come?*”⁶ I lift up my eyes to the hills—the dark, foreboding, intimidating, obstructing, scary hills—where will my help come from? Where can we find the light?

I believe there are stars of light in the hopeful signs we see around us. All the news is not bad. Sometimes we focus so much on the difficulties that we forget to look for the good in the world. There are vaccines now inoculating our front-line workers and skilled care residents all over the country. More is coming. Almost everyone will have a chance to get a good vaccine against COVID-19 hopefully by the summer. The fact that effective vaccines were developed in less than a year is an amazing scientific breakthrough.

Even if you do get the virus, the treatments have improved as medical professionals have learned better methods to help people survive. Even though deaths are increasing far too rapidly, the death rate has actually dropped significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. Statistically, your chances are still pretty good. Only about 1.7% of the cases in Arkansas end in death, so there is a 98% chance if you get the virus, you will not die from it. This is not a reason to abandon any of our safety precautions. In fact, we should be even more diligent as the cases, hospitalizations, and deaths continue to surge. Our hospitals and health care workers are working beyond capacity. But there are signs of hope.

In March, the Associated Press started a series of articles called “One Good Thing,” to counter all the bad news they were having to report. Over the last nine months over 180 articles of good news have been published. This week, they looked back at their favorite ten stories, about

- teachers that went to extreme lengths to reach their students,
- birthday parades with fire trucks for sick kids (We’ve had a few of those for church members, but no fire trucks.),
- musicians who gave free concerts on the street or in parks,
- crowds who applauded or sang for health care workers,
- newlyweds who had to cancel their wedding and gave their food to the hungry.⁷

These signs of hope bring light in the darkness.

I think we look for light in our relationships. We are spending more time with fewer people than we used to. That was really hard to do over the holidays. But there have been multitudes of opportunities for quality time with our families or our “bubble” over the last few months. If you have

good relationships, this has been a time to enjoy and deepen and strengthen those relationships apart from the hectic pace of life before the pandemic. If your relationships were strained or conflicted, this is a time to work on making them better.

I listen to a podcast regularly from the New York Times called “The Daily.” Last week they featured good news stories from 2020. One of the stories was about a mother and her teenage daughter. Before the pandemic, they weren’t really talking to one another, unless they were fighting over something. But having to spend much more time together and less time away from home, they began to talk more and fight less, and the months of staying safe led to a new depth of love and appreciation they had for one another. In fact, most of the good news stories that were shared were about relational things. People fell in love, got married, had babies, recovered from disease—these were the good news stories from 2020.⁸

I hope you recognized in a new way the importance of our church family in 2020. This has happened for me in both a positive and a negative way. In a negative way, we have been separated from one another for nine months, and that has been painful. Absence has made the heart grow fonder, as they say, and I realize how much this church means to me. In a positive way, I have seen so many ways the church has stayed together. We have been together online, on the telephone, by text and email and snail mail. It has been wonderful to see how people have stayed in touch and checked on one another. And it has been great to hear time and again words of appreciation for all the church is still doing to stay on mission. When I look for light in our relationships in the family and the church, I see lots of stars.

Finally, we can look for light in the resources of our faith. The message of Christmas is “God is with us.” God came to us in Jesus so God could be with us through thick and thin. God sustains us through times of crisis. The pandemic and associated disasters of 2020 are not the first time God’s people have been challenged. Look through the history of the Bible and the Church and you will see plagues and pandemics, natural disasters, and political oppression and destruction, sometimes lasting for decades. But somehow God’s people have always come through, and God is still

God. In the times of trouble, God gives us resources to cope with our difficulties.

One of the most important resources, in this time of isolation and quarantine, is prayer, spending time with God and giving our troubles to God's care. Prayer can take so many forms as you develop your relationship with God. All through Advent, we shared different prayer practices that you can try to get some peace in troubled times. I hope you'll hang on to those. We still have books and printouts available, and the videos are on our YouTube channel. I can't think of anything better to carry into the New Year than a strengthened practice of prayer. I'll admit, I could do better at this myself.

There are other resources of faith as well. Spend time reading and reflecting on Scripture. Worship with the community of faith, even if it is online. Read and study books about faith. Develop your system of beliefs. Do something in service to someone less fortunate. Rejoice in the hope of ultimate victory in eternal life. We can deal with the difficulties now because we know the end of the story. The worst thing is never the last thing.

Our God is so awesome, and the resources of our faith are so huge, that the problems of this world just pale by comparison.

Did you go out and see the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn the week before Christmas? We ended up on a hill near the McClure amphitheater at Chaffee Crossing. The weather was perfect. We didn't have any special equipment, but you could see it well with the naked eye. The conjunction of the two planets made a visible difference in the night sky. Was it the same thing as the Bethlehem star? Maybe. Maybe not. But astronomers can tell you that the same conjunction happened in 7 B.C.E. Just seeing something happen that has happened periodically over thousands of years—and hadn't happened like that in 800 years—was truly amazing. It filled my heart and made me realize again what a big God and big world we have, and how the conjunction of disasters in one little misbegotten year is not going to stop the plan of God for the salvation of the planet.

So the New Year is upon us. I can't say that I'm sad to see 2020 go. But I know that turning a calendar page will not solve our problems. The

challenges of 2020 are following us into 2021, and there will probably be new ones along the way. But hear this word of encouragement. Keep looking for the light. See the light in signs of hope all around you. See the light in your close relationships. See the light in the church community. See the light in the resources of faith God gives you.

You know, the Psalmist answered his own question: “*From where will my help come?*” He says, “*My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*”⁹ With that perspective, you can not only say it, but also believe it and claim it: this is going to be a happy New Year!

¹ Isaiah 60:1-3.

² Matthew 2:2.

³ Matthew 2:8.

⁴ John 8:12.

⁵ John 1:4-5.

⁶ Psalm 121:1.

⁷ “Bright Spots in Dark Days,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, December 30, 2020, 6B.

⁸ Michael Barbaro, “The Daily,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2020.

⁹ Psalm 121:2.