

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Vero Beach, Fla.
Dr. Les Koerselman
November 27, 2011

Lessons: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
I Corinthians 1:3-9
Isaiah 9:2-7

Text: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined." Isaiah 9:2

Turn on the Light

It began in the year 228 B.C. It took over four decades to construct. It was done by human labor, and it is a monument that stands yet to this day. It is the Great Wall of China. The human cost in terms of blood, sweat and tears was immense, yet they believed the energy that was expended was wise. Its purpose was to protect their northern border from barbaric hordes which invaded their land and pillaged it. When completed the great wall was over 1500 miles long, over 30 feet high and over 20 feet thick.

It was too high to climb over, it was too thick to break down, and it was too long to go around. The people of China were safe, or so they thought. In the first 100 years following the construction of that great wall, China was invaded not once, not twice, but three times. How did they do it? They never once breached the walls. They bribed the gatekeeper. They placed too much reliance and faith in the wall and they did not spend enough time building the character of the one who would guard its entrance.

Such was the very case with the people of Israel at precisely the same time in history. The land of promise and hope that had been bequeathed to the people of Israel had been settled. Joshua, a mighty warrior, had led the people of Israel across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. City after city was subdued. People after people were driven from the land. The great warrior, statesman and king, David, expanded the borders of this beloved land.

Commands were given that the people ought to be separate and holy; a people that would be peculiar unto their God.

Tragically they followed only half heartedly, and as a consequence the character of the people began to crumble. The kingdom was divided. Enemies from the north, east and south invaded the Promised Land. The Persians, the Medes, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Grecians, the Romans laid plunder to this Promised Land.

Israel, a strip of real estate, not much more than 200 miles long and 75 miles wide, is inch for inch, acre by acre saturated with more human blood than any other place on the face of the earth. The Promised Land had lost its hope.

The peoples had been carried off into slavery and the cities laid waste. It is at this very time that the great Prophet, Isaiah, speaks to a people in exile, to a people who were spiritually bankrupt. It was a time in the history of the people of Israel wherein they feared God far more than they loved him. Their hope had been turned to despair. The light that had so often visited Israel had been dimmed.

Light throughout their history had been used to symbolize the very presence of the living God. We turn back the pages of the Old Testament and we have there the encounter of Moses with the burning bush, and how God spoke to Moses. "Take off your sandals, for the ground whereon you stand is holy ground. Deliver my people." The Exodus began, a pillar of fire by night led the people of Israel into the wilderness and then into the Promised Land.

Angel visitations were common throughout the Old Testament. These heavenly ambassadors were clothed in white light. The temple of God contained the golden candlesticks. These were forever lighted and burning symbolizing the living presence of God. The Hebrew word, "Shikenneh," means this very thing.

The candlesticks on our Communion table are remnants of that message; "Shikenneh," the presence of the Living God, the Light of God in our presence.

The people of Israel however, were a people that were walking in darkness. It is to these people that Isaiah speaks. He trumpets a message of hope and of a Savior who was going to intervene in their world in real life terms. What better way to do it. Take on the form of a man. Become a part of their world. God was going to visit his people, but at what time? The people languished. They cried out. They sought the direction of God but without answer.

There were 400 years of prophetic silence. There was no voice to speak for the Living God. The Gospel of John states that in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son.

What kind of time was it? Sherwood Wirt wrote this on a Christmas card. It describes the chaotic and unsettled world into which our Lord entered:

"The people of that time were being heavily taxed, and faced every prospect of a sharp increase to cover expanding military expenses. The threat of world domination by a cruel, ungodly, power-intoxicated band of men was ever just below the threshold of consciousness. Moral deterioration had corrupted the upper levels of society and was moving rapidly into the broad base of the populace. Intense nationalistic feeling was clashing openly with new and sinister forms of imperialism. Conformity was the spirit of the age. Government handouts were being used with increasing lavishness to keep the population from rising up and throwing out the leaders. Interest rates were spiraling upward in the midst of an inflated economy.

External religious observances were considered a political asset, and abnormal emphasis was being placed upon sports and athletic competition. Racial tensions were at the breaking point.

In such a time, and amid such a people, a child was born to a migrant couple who had just signed up for a fresh round of taxation, and who were soon to become political exiles. And the child who was born was called, among other things, Immanuel, God with us."

Miraculously, the light of God broke into a dark and dismal world.

Today there are clouds that would diminish the light of Christ. We need to dispel them. We need to allow the light of Christ to illumine our individual lives as never before.

Bishop John Robinson wrote a book some years ago entitled, "Honest to God." He places before us questions that probe at the very nature of the incarnation. What if it had not happened? Bishop Robinson writes:

"Suppose the whole notion of a God who visits the earth in the person of His Son is as mythical as the prince in the fairy story. Suppose there is no realm "out there" from which the man from heaven arrives.

Suppose the Christian myth (the invasion of this side by the other side), as opposed to the Christmas history (the birth of the man, Jesus of Nazareth), has to go. Are we prepared for that?"

The question that might well be raised, and should be raised is, "Would it make any difference if the story did go?"

Well for me, and for millions of others, yes, it would make a profound difference. We would be forced to live life in the shadows. We would not know the fullness of God's love nor the depth of His compassion.

"The people that have walked in darkness have seen a great light." We need to trumpet that message today. It is our story. It is the world's story. In a matter of weeks all the world will hush to once again remember an event that has eternal consequences. It has touched every human life; it has touched the political course of the world. It is the moment when God became flesh and dwelt among us.

But some have changed Christmas. Perhaps we run the risk of changing it in a secular world. Here's a parody on the Christmas story, but put in twentieth century language:

"And there were in the same country children keeping watch over their stockings by the fireplace. And, Lo, Santa Claus came upon them, and they were sore afraid. And Santa Claus said unto them: "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy which be to all people who can afford them. For unto you will be given great feasts of turkey, dressing and cake, and many presents; and this shall be a sign unto you, ye shall find presents wrapped in bright paper lying beneath a tree adorned with tinsel, colored balls and lights.

And suddenly there will be with you a multitude of relatives and friends, praising you and saying, 'Thank you so much, it was just what I wanted.'

And it shall come to pass as the friends and relatives have gone away into their own homes, the parents shall say to one another, 'Darn it! What a mess to clean up. I'm tired, let's go to bed and pick it up tomorrow. Thank goodness, Christmas only comes once a year.' And they go with haste to their cold bed and find their desired rest."

For too many in our world that parody is a fairly accurate picture of their lives and what they believe. The truth that the living God has invaded our world will be neglected, forgotten, ignored.

Advent means coming! At this time of year it is wise to remember that as we prepare our hearts we celebrate not only His birth but also live with the anticipation that he shall come again.

The one whom we exalt at Christmas is not just a babe in a manger - safe, cute, cuddly, and likeable. He is not a character in a children's story. He is far more. The first time he came our Lord was clothed in the form of a child. The next time he comes, and I believe it will be soon, he will come without disguise, and it will be abundantly and immediately clear to all the world just who he really is.

The first time he came a star marked his arrival. The next time he comes, the Book of Revelation states, the whole heavens will roll up like a scroll, and all the stars will fall out of the sky, because none will dare to diminish his glory, and Christ himself will light it.

The first time he came, wise men and shepherds brought him gifts. The next time he comes, he will bring gifts, and the gifts will be for those who were called faithful.

The first time he came there was no room in the inn. The next time he comes the whole world will not be able to contain his glory.

The first time he came, only a few attended his arrival - some shepherds and wise men. The next time he comes, every eye shall behold him, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord of Lord and the King of Kings.

The first time he came as a baby, the next time he comes he will come as Sovereign King and Sovereign Lord.

Dear friends, at this time of year let our preparation, anticipation and celebration bring to light God's intervention in our world. Let us pray that the love, which compelled God to send forth his Son, might compel us to come and in so doing welcome His living presence in our midst.