

**SCRIPTURE TEXTS:** Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

**SERMON TITLE:** From Darkness to Light

Do you know what? I love Christmas lights! I love lights on trees, lights on buildings, candlelight at Christmas Eve—I love it all! Now granted, sometimes we go a little too far with the lights like with the announcement about a school Christmas play that read: All of the cast will be played by members of the eighth grade, except the baby Jesus, who will be played by a concealed 40-watt light bulb. (Hewett, James S. editor. *Illustrations Unlimited*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988, p. 79.) Aside from this, there's just something about the lights of Christmas penetrating the darkness that stirs my soul. For one thing, the lights trigger childhood memories of Christmas with my family and the lights on the tree.

One of the most spectacular displays of Christmas lights that I've ever seen is in Johnson City at the Pedernales Electric Cooperative building. They cover everything with lights—hundreds of lights on the buildings and in the trees. It's incredible! There's so much light that it appears to be daytime in the darkness of night.

And I have one special memory of those lights in Johnson City. It comes from Christmas, 1994. My dad had been battling cancer for several years. Well, in 1994 he felt well enough that he and my mom made a trip from Beeville to Fredericksburg at Christmas time to pay us a visit. While they were there, we took an evening and drove over to Johnson City to see the lights. The sight was breathtaking. I'll never forget that night because as it turned out, that was my dad's last Christmas with us. He died the following April. There hasn't been a Christmas since that I haven't thought of my dad and that trip to Johnson City to see the Christmas lights. It's a precious memory.

So I love Christmas lights—and it not just because of my personal memories, as precious as they are. The lights kindle ancient memories that belong to all of us—memories that fill the

present with joy and the future with hope—memories that open us to the light of Christ that still shines so brightly even in the lingering darkness of this present age.

Now you probably didn't realize it at the time, but when the Taylor family read the text from Isaiah, they pulled up a memory that's over 2,700 years. It's a memory kept alive by a prophet's poem addressed to God. The poem remembers a time when the people of the kingdom of Judah walked in darkness. They lived in a land of deep darkness. Their king had not listened to God, so God stopped speaking—and the people were left with their sin.

It was also a time of war and oppression. The people were burdened by a yoke; the bar had been placed across their backs. They existed under the rod of the oppressor. They heard the boots of tramping warriors pounding upon the ground; they saw garments rolled in blood.

But in the midst of the darkness, the people saw a great light. The light shined on them and the bar was broken—and the warrior's boots and the garments rolled in blood were burned as fuel for the fire. The light shined upon them in the birth of a child—a crown prince in the line of David! The prophet announced his birth, proclaimed his authority and heaped upon him names of honor: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And the prophet promised a future of hope—of endless peace—of justice and righteousness forevermore. And the people rejoiced at the good news! They embraced the hope of the promise and they kept it alive by applying it to subsequent kings and even later, to the expected Messiah.

But their hopes went unfulfilled. The darkness persisted; the light grew dim; the faithfulness of kings remained as fickle as ever; and the joy of the people once again turned to sadness. But hope survived!

And then, in the fullness of time, came Jesus. To those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, his life embodied the promise of Isaiah. He came as a gift from God—a burst of light into

the persistent darkness and the darkness did not overcome it—not even the darkness of sin and death.

And when we ponder his birth, we see the fulfillment of those ancient yearnings for a ruler worthy of praise and devotion. We hear his birth announced not by a prophet, but by a multitude of the heavenly host singing songs of glory to God and of peace on earth.

And yes, we have seen the sign: a newborn baby—a Savior, born in the city of David, the Messiah, the Lord—announced as good news of great joy for all the people.

So I love Christmas lights. They stir up personal memories that are precious for me and they spark ancient memories that belong to all of us—memories that fill the present with joy and the future with hope—memories that open us to the light of Christ that still shines so brightly even in the lingering darkness of this present age.

And yes, there is lingering darkness, but that's not our concern tonight because the light continues to shine. Can't we see it? Can't we see the light of Christ shining from the Bethlehem stable? Then why not come out of the darkness to walk in the light—to live in the light—so that the light of Christ shines through us into the world?

Poet Brian Wren offers the invitation with words more powerful than mine:

Will you come and see the light from the stable door?  
It is shining newly bright, though it shone before.  
It will be your guiding star, it will show you who you are.  
Will you hide or decide to meet the light?

Will you tell about the light in the prison cell?  
Though it's shackled out of sight, it is shining well.  
When the truth is cut and bruised, and the innocent abused,  
will you hide or decide to meet the light?

Will you join the hope alight in a young girl's eyes  
of the might put to flight by a baby's cries?  
When the lowest and the least are the foremost at the feast,  
Will you hide or decide to meet the light?

Will you travel by the light of the babe new born?

In the candle lit at night there's a gleam of dawn,  
and the darkness all about is too dim to put it out:  
Will you hide or decide to meet the light?