

Wesley United Methodist Church

December 24, 2018

“A Great Light.”

Luke 2:1-20

The Christmas story begins in darkness. There was the darkness of oppression, for God’s people were a conquered people. They were a beaten and defeated people. There was darkness of persecution. Indeed, it was a despised taxation that brought the participants in the story together in that fateful night. There was the darkness of disillusionment. There was an ever-increasing number who felt that violence, not faith, was the most effective path. Yes, on that first Christmas, the mood was one of despair and resignation.

And so it was then and so it is now. We too live in a world of darkness. There are wars and rumors of wars, hunger and unemployment, racism, loneliness, and a sense of emptiness. Perhaps the poet Robert Frost worded it best when he wrote: “I have been acquainted with the night. I have walked in the rain and out of the rain. I have been acquainted with the night. I don’t have to tell any of you about the darkness, because in one form or another, at one time or another, it has touched the life of each person here. You have been acquainted with the night. So, we do not come here this evening to deny the existence of the darkness. Nowhere in the scripture do we receive a pep talk and an argument that things aren’t really as bad as they seem. Rather, it affirms that the darkness is real and it is present. But it also affirms that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.” John’s Gospel records: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

So we come together to sing again the words: Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light. History records for us an interesting footnote. It was during the dark winter of 1864. At Petersburg, Virginia, the Confederate army of Robert E. Lee faced the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant. The war was now three and a half years old and the glorious charge had long since given away to the muck and mud of trench warfare. Late one evening one of Lee’s generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Up and down the line the Southerners began building huge bonfires in celebration of the event. These fires did not go unnoticed in the Northern camps and soon a nervous Grant sent out a reconnaissance patrol to see what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had a son and these were celebration fires. It so happened that Grant and Pickett had been contemporaries at West Point and knew one another well, so to honor the occasion Grant, too, ordered that bonfires should be built.

What a peculiar night it was. For miles on both sides of the lines, fires burned. No shots fired. No yelling back and forth. No war fought, only light celebrating the birth of a child. But it didn’t last forever. Soon the fires burned down and once again the darkness took over—the darkness of the night and the darkness of war.

The good news of Christmas is that in the midst of a deep darkness there came a light, and the darkness was not able to overcome that light. It was not just a temporary flicker. It was an eternal flame. We need to remember that. There are times, in the events of the world and in the events of our own personal lives, that we feel that the light will be snuffed out. But the Christmas story affirms that whatever happens, the light still shines.

The ancient Hebrews were afraid of the darkness. They were particularly afraid of a place they called the outer darkness. To them creation began when God said: Let there be light. To them, where there was darkness there was only void and emptiness. What a great meaning and hope it must have been for them when they heard Jesus refer to himself as the light of the world. We who are suffering loneliness, grief, and despair need to hear these words this Christmas. The darkness is real. But because of Christmas, it will never get so dark that you can’t see the light.

Into the darkness God sent an eternal light. As you walk outside this evening, notice that the darkness does not intrude upon light. On the contrary, it is the light that intrudes upon the darkness. Light is always stronger than darkness. And the forces of light are stronger than the forces of darkness.

The greatest need in our mixed-up and confused world this day is to let people know that there is hope. That life is worth living no matter what. We should not be discouraged to the point of despair. In Jesus Christ we shall cling to the hope that life overcomes death, that love conquers hate, and that truth will prevail over falsehood. We are the people of light and we must share that light in a dark and a dreary land.

Why do you think that God chose to use a star to guide the wise men to Bethlehem? I am convinced that it was not by accident. It was an eternal reminder to them and to us that in a sea of darkness, it is the light that keeps us going forward. It is the light of hope and the light of Christ that leads the way and dispels the gloom. It is my prayer that the light of Christmas will shine and enlighten the dark corners of your life and that you, will discover the pathway to Bethlehem.