

In the name of ✠ Jesus, your Savior who is Christ the Lord.

The Christmas Eve service is striking because of the darkness. It surrounds us; it swallows us up. We actually have two candlelight services during the church year: this one, and the kindling of the paschal light at the Easter Vigil on the Eve of the Resurrection of our Lord. As much as I love that service, it is not as dramatic, for especially with Daylight savings time in effect, at our 7 PM service the light shines not in the darkness, but into a dusky gray.

It's especially at the Christmas Eve service that the contrast between light and darkness is so apparent. Liberal Bible scholars tell us that our celebration of Christmas, indeed, is nothing more than a Christianized version of a pagan festival the "birthday of the unconquered sun," celebrating the victory of the physical light over darkness. That's why, we're told, it's held near the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere.

But these scholars are far too dogmatic about their assertions. Definitive proof is not available for the beginnings of the Christmas celebration, but a more plausible explanation, one that we find in the writings of many of the church fathers, points to the fact that Jesus' conception on March 25<sup>th</sup> was the first established date—coinciding with his death on the same date. And then from this date, nine months later we arrive at December 25<sup>th</sup>.

But, of course, at this time of the year, we are aware of the overwhelming darkness, and we begin to yearn for more light, which leads to the contrast between light and darkness, and therefore, we see that kind of rich imagery being used in Christmas sermons both ancient and modern. For Scripture is replete with this kind of language. It reminds us, for example, that apart from God, the world is darkness. Indeed, before the Word spoke forth when the earth was made, we hear how "*darkness was over the face of the deep.*" But then [our creating] God said, "*Let there be light, and there was light. ... the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.*"

Scripture reminds us, too, that Adam and Eve walked with God in the cool of the day, that is, in the light. But darkness entered in through their sin, and they hid themselves. Through their transgression in the garden, mankind became a people who loved "*the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*" We became a people walking in darkness, dwelling "*in a land of deep darkness,*" not only in sin, but walking in the darkness of ignorance, without knowledge and understanding.

Dark indeed have been our ways of late, as we hear of more and more people calling themselves “nones,” who do not believe in God at all, or of people following ungodly religions doing wicked things: attacking and kidnapping and oppressing and killing. *“The way of the wicked,”* says the Scripture, is the way of *“deep darkness.”* That is mankind’s way. In the face of the kinds of evil we see far too often on television, it is not our trust in God that is being challenged, but our false trust in the goodness of man, for we know evil also resides in each of us. Indeed, as Jesus says, *“if the light in [man] is darkness, how great is the darkness.”* And the eternal consequence of this darkness is death.

But into this darkness, God has shined a great light, for the Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; rather He desires that the wicked turn from their ways and live. Therefore out of His great love for us, God sent the Light of the world that turns the darkness into light, a light that no darkness can overcome. Of this Light, sun and moon and all the shining stars give Him praise, for this Light is God’s own Son, their maker, their Lord.

This Light, *“the true light, which gives light to everyone,”* has come *“into the world.”* He is Christ, our Lord. He came, though, not as Light in unveiled splendor, but hidden, as a babe *“wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”* He came as a king without a palace, attended by ox and ass, revered by shepherds. He came not just as Divine light veiled in flesh. He came as life for us, and grace for us, and truth for us, and peace for us. *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

The True Light has come into the world, but like the magi and shepherds long ago, we must be satisfied with a star pointing the way to Him, and with the reflected glory of the Lord seen in His angels, and with the lamp of God’s word shining in the darkness. And we see the glory of our Savior, Christ the Lord—His light—shining most brightly from the cross on which He was later raised. While the world was shrouded in darkness, there we see the Light of men giving mankind Life by His death, glory by His shame, forgiveness by His blood, hope by His victory.

For tonight, we are also here *“to pay attention [to this message, not just the message of the incarnation, but of our redemption] as to a lamp shining in a dark place ... for the day has dawned and the morning star has risen in your hearts.”* The world expects a vision of sugar plums dancing in their heads; therefore, the god of this world has blinded their minds to the joyous message and kept *“them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”* But the mystery of God

has been revealed to you, in humble flesh and in even humbler cross, and this message brings you light. For the same “*God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in [your] hearts [this mystery] to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

What a wondrous thing to behold, “*this thing that the Lord has made known to us,*” this sign of a “*baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*” “*Glory to God in the highest.*” “*Arise, shine, for your light has come. ... The glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*” In the midst of today’s darkness, this Light shines still. Look to the Light. He has made you “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.*” With nations and kings, come to His light and the brightness of His rising, and then go forth proclaiming “*the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*”

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.