

Shine: 1. Light Wins!
Isaiah 9:2; Matthew 5:14-16
December 3, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

It's not a Christmas song. But the song that inspired this series is "This Little Light of Mine." It is a gospel song that became an anthem of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. It was not, as some have thought, an African American spiritual sung on plantations during slavery. Instead, it was a children's song written in the 1920s, reminding us there is a light that each of us has been given and when we let that light shine, there is a greater power at work in this world. My favorite version of the song was sung by the Harlem Boys' Choir on the David Letterman Show on September 19, 2001. Take a listen. [video] Do you remember that time? The twin towers had fallen, something no one had even considered possible. Air travel was halted – for days. We were terrified. Parents went to school to get their children. That evening our sanctuary was filled with people who were frightened and confused. The Letterman Show went off the air because it seemed wrong for us laugh. It was darkness. And then a group of boys stood up to sing a prophetic hymn. "This little light of mine; I'm going to let it shine." In the midst of darkness, the light wins. No matter how dark it gets, the light cannot be extinguished. Light wins!

It's what the prophet Isaiah was saying. **The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.** (Isaiah 9:2) They had not seen the light yet, but Isaiah's hope was that they would. It was the 8th century BC and the southern kingdom of Judah was in turmoil. People were anxious and afraid. The northern kingdom has already fallen to the Assyrian Empire that was expanding its territory closer to the southern kingdom. A succession of kings had struggled to preserve Judah's existence, but Isaiah proclaimed a political solution was not the answer. It was a dark night, but Isaiah announced that God could raise up a new king who would rule over the people with justice and kindness. It would be like the light breaking over the horizon. Are you ready? Will you welcome that light? But they couldn't, or they wouldn't – and it would be another 800 years until the light would break into the world.

And when it did, Jesus proclaimed: **You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl, Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.** (Matthew 5:14-15) What he had in mind was a lamp like this. Oh so fragile, but with a light so strong that if you put it on a lampstand it would illumine the entire house. [slide] And imagine, if everyone did this – if everyone let the light shine. [camera] Jesus was saying, no matter how dark it gets, light will prevail. The light is waiting to break through. It's not the circumstances of our lives that can get the best of us, it's us – thinking we can't or shouldn't or we're not good enough to shine. The judgment we place on ourselves or others can beat us down and darken our lives, like putting a bowl over our light. It's this shame that gets passed around: you will never measure up; you will never be good enough. Or it's what we say to ourselves: I messed up; I always mess up; I never seem to amount to much of anything; God can't use me. What is it that is keeping your light hidden?

Imagine if Mary and Joseph had let shame get the best of them? There would have been no Christmas. The first chapter of Matthew introduces us to Joseph who is saying, "This is not how it was supposed to be." He had waited through the traditional betrothal period so that he could marry Mary. As a carpenter, he knew you measure twice, cut once. It's attention to detail, but now this arranged marriage had taken a wrong turn and was headed to disaster. His fiancée was pregnant and he knows it wasn't him. This is not how life was supposed to be. What did I

do to deserve this? Have you been there? And Mary was facing her own struggle. Pregnant by the Holy Spirit – nobody would believe that. Maybe that's why she left town to spend her pregnancy with her relative, Elizabeth. A pregnant, unwed teenager in an impoverished community – what chance did she have? Shame on her. Shame on me. She was doomed.

Can an unwed, pregnant teenager can be the mother of the Prince of Peace or is her future lost and she will never amount to much? Which is it? What's the song tell us. Hide it under a bushel – No! I'm going to let it shine. The darkness is not going to prevail. The light wins. And the very thing that can be the source of shame to cover the light can be used by God to uncover the light.

When I was a senior in high school, I signed up for speech class. It was an elective. I didn't have to take it. I didn't even want to take it, but I heard it would be a good thing if you wanted to go to college. So, I took the class. I only remember one particular day in that class. I will never forget it. It was the day we learned about extemporaneous speeches. There would be no research, no preparation. Each of us would be given a topic, and we would give a 5 minute speech in front of the class. And wouldn't you know it, Mrs Olausen called on me first. She held out a basket that contained slips of paper, each one with a different topic. I reached in, took a slip of paper, opened it, and read my topic: What is love? I thought I would be sick. I was terrified. I had maybe 3 seconds to think what to say. And I've never forgotten what I said. Here is my entire extemporaneous speech on the topic "What is love?" from a terrified 17 year old who had no idea what to say. So, I began. "What is love? There are a lot of different definitions of love." I paused, took a breath and remembered the movie I had just seen – The Love Story – starring Allie McGraw and Ryan O'Neil and the subtitle of the movie was "love means never having to say you are sorry." So I said, "Some people say love means never having to say you are sorry." And I froze. I could not think of anything else to say. I paused, took another breath, and without really thinking I said, "So just go out and have a good time." And the entire class broke into laughter, and for a moment I thought I did okay. I had just won the approval of the entire class! But as I walked back to my seat, Mrs Olausen held out a slip of paper which I opened. On it was written on a big red "F." And as I took my seat in the back row, I was crushed – and embarrassed – everyone had laughed because they knew it was a speech worthy of an "F". And I wore that F for years, decades really. What are you doing ever considering a career in ministry. You can't even put together a 5 minute speech that is worthy of anything but an "F". You can't do it.

The very thing that can be the source of shame to cover the light can be used by God to uncover the light. **An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife..."** (Matthew 1:22) It's the most mentioned command in the Bible – do not be afraid. We are more than a list of faults and mistakes and missed opportunities. God is waiting to break through – to let the light shine through. When we look up at the night sky, we see a lot of stars – but someone looked up and saw more than stars and connected the dots to make what we call the Big Dipper. Have you seen it? What if you took the dots of your life and called it Big Glory? The very thing that can be the source of shame to cover the light can be used by God to uncover the light. Jesus said: **Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5:16)

Recently, I was listening to a TED talk by Drew Dudley. He went to school at Mt Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada. And on his last day there a student came up to him and said, "I remember the first time I met you." And then she told him what happened four years earlier. She said, "On the day before I started at University I was in my hotel room with my mom

and dad and I was so scared and so convinced that I could not do this that I wasn't ready for university that I just burst into tears." And her parents said, "we know you're scared but let's go tomorrow and if at any point you feel that you can't do this, that's fine. Just tell us and we'll take you home. We love you no matter what." So the next day she was in line for registration and she looked around and knew she couldn't do it. She was ready to quit and as soon as she made that decision a feeling of peace came over her. She turned to tell her mom and dad they were leaving when at that very moment Drew came out of the student union wear the stupidest hat she had ever seen and wearing a sign that promoted a student organization and carrying a bucket of lollipops. And he walked up to her, stopped, stared, then looked at the guy next to her, smiled, and reached into his bucket, pulled out a lollipop, held it out to him and said, "You need to give a lollipop to the beautiful woman next to you." And she said, "He turned beet red, and was so embarrassed he would not even look at me, but he held out the lollipop and I felt so bad for him that I took the lollipop." And then you said to my mom and dad, "Look at that! First day away from home and already she is taking candy from a stranger?" And everyone around them broke into laughter, and in that moment, I know I should not quit. I knew I was where I was supposed to be. I knew I was home." And she said to Drew, "I haven't spoken to you in four years but when I heard you were leaving, I had to come and tell you how important you have been in my life." And she started to walk away, then turned and said, "You should know I'm still dating that guy four years later." A year and a half later, Drew receives an invitation to their wedding. And here's the kicker, Drew says he does not remember that moment with the lollipop. It was possibly the moment when he had the most impact on a person's life and he did not even remember.

Let your light SHINE. Someone is waiting for the light to break through. **When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.** (Matthew 1:24) God is ready. God is like the electricity that is seeking a lamp. You have been given the power to make someone's life better with something you say or something you do. You may never see the impact. You might not live long enough to see that you are part of a story bigger than yourself. God is ready. Do not be afraid. Hide is under a bushel? No! Shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 3, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Loving God, you give life and have not given up on a world that wanders far from your purposes. Thank you for keeping the promises you have made to us. Thank you for the way you are always available to us. Shine your light on the darker recesses of our lives and help us to bring joy to those around us, especially during this Advent season. Amen.

Monday, December 4

Scripture: Psalm 139:7-18, 23-24

Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there. If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—even there your hand would guide me; even there your strong hand would hold me tight! If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you! You are the one who created my innermost parts; you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb. I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart. Your works are wonderful—I know that very well. My bones weren't hidden from you when I was being put together in a secret place, when I was being woven together in the deep parts of the earth. Your

eyes saw my embryo, and on your scroll every day was written that was being formed for me, before any one of them had yet happened. God, your plans are incomprehensible to me! Their total number is countless! If I tried to count them—they outnumber grains of sand! If I came to the very end—I'd still be with you.

Examine me, God! Look at my heart! Put me to the test! Know my anxious thoughts! Look to see if there is any idolatrous way in me, then lead me on the eternal path!

Observation: This psalm is a prayer for God to examine one's heart and see the nature of our devotion to God. How awesome to approach God, who knows every thought, word and deed, from whom there is no hiding, who has been privy even to one's formation in the dark concealment of the womb. There is no hiding from God – even the darkness is not dark to God.

Application: So, how is it with your soul? What is it that God sees that no one else can see? I'm reminded of moments in childhood when I didn't need to say anything. My mother looked at me and she could tell that something was not right, and as she reached out to me, I did not need to say a word. She knew. God is reaching out to you. God already knows.

Prayer: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.

Tuesday, December 5

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. They shouted to each other, saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory!" The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke. I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the LORD of heavenly forces!" Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed." Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" I said, "I'm here; send me."

Observation: This is Isaiah's experience of being in the presence of God. Although this reading does not use the image of light, Isaiah clearly felt that God could see him in a way that no one else could see him. In the presence of the Holy, he has a profound sense of his uncleanness, but God is drawn to that. Suddenly forgiven and cleansed, he is given a new purpose.

Application: Will Isaiah accept the calling that God has placed on his life? Imagine if he had said no and refused to go. Imagine if there had been no prophet of hope in a period of utter darkness and destruction. Imagine if the followers of Jesus looked to scripture and found no evidence of a promised Messiah. Isaiah could not imagine any of this, but God did. Where is God calling you to go?

Prayer: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, you give life and provide order for all creation. Give me the wisdom to know what you want me to do and the courage to do it. Amen.

Wednesday, December 6

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted. At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire. A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

Observation: Isaiah has been called by God to deliver a tough message about the consequences of disobedience. The Assyrian Empire was expanding its territory and the northern kingdom of Israel lay in its path. The southern kingdom of Judah would also experience a similar fate – its people killed or taken into exile in Babylon. But Isaiah also offered God's message of hope. In the midst of destruction and suffering, there would come a light. Hundreds of years later, as the followers of Jesus turned to the writings of the prophet Isaiah, they would see the promise that Jesus and his salvation would be a light for the Gentiles.

Application: Isaiah's vision of what will be reads as if it has already taken place. Such is the promise of God. God is committed to accomplishing God's purposes. You and I may not see that yet, but God is committed to achieving what God promises. That is true for today as well. There may be places in your life where you see no evidence that God is doing anything, but God can see and God is already working.

Prayer: Gracious and merciful God, give me the confidence that I need to know that I can trust you today, tomorrow and forever. I offer my life to you once again. Lead me in your way. Amen.

Thursday, December 7

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Aram. Aram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the king. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon was the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the father of Abijah. Abijah was the father of Asaph. Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram. Joram was the father of Uzziah. Uzziah was the father of Jotham. Jotham was the father of Ahaz. Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh. Manasseh was the father of Amos. Amos was the father of Josiah. Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers. This was at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud. Abiud was the father of Eliakim. Eliakim was

the father of Azor. Azor was the father of Zadok. Zadok was the father of Achim. Achim was the father of Eliud. Eliud was the father of Eleazar. Eleazar was the father of Matthan. Matthan was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ. So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.

Observation: The New Testament begins with a listing of the family tree. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is not just one more name in a long list of names, but he is the goal. The genealogy is arranged in six groups of seven names. The number seven was and is one of the most powerful symbolic numbers and to be born at the beginning of the seventh seven is to be the climax of the whole list. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what Israel has been waiting for for two thousand years.

Application: The light of the world comes to us through a long line of biblical characters. Matthew did not select every ancestor in history. If you recognize any of the names, why would he list who he does? Are there persons in your own family tree whose lives have prepared the way for you?

Prayer: God of the Ages and this present moment, how grateful I am that you have been working in every generation. I am living into the legacy that others have prepared for me. Help me to honor their hopes and dreams with my life. Amen.

Friday, December 8

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, And they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.") When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Observation: In Luke's gospel, we see the story of Jesus' birth through Mary's eyes, but in Matthew's gospel it is through Joseph's. According to conventional first century wisdom, Joseph should have walked away. Mary was pregnant, and he was not the father. This story is clouded with shame, and Joseph is facing a decision that would have eternal consequences.

Application: Mary and Joseph are chosen to be Jesus' parents. Two, as yet, unwed teenagers are given the responsibility of raising a child who would be the light shining in the darkness. Did your parents help you shine your light? Why or why not? Joseph was surprised to hear about Mary's pregnancy. How did Joseph respond? How do you respond when you are surprised by God?

Prayer: Dear Lord, how thankful I am that Joseph and Mary accepted the responsibility that you placed in their lives. I am grateful for all those persons who have cared for me and helped me see what you could do through me. Help me to encourage others and point them to you. Amen.

Saturday, December 9

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16

You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation: God called Israel to be the light of the world (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). Israel was the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world's dark corners, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were wandering around in the dark to find their way. But what if the people called to be the bearers of the light had become part of the darkness? That was Jesus' warning and also his challenge.

Application: Because Jesus is the Light of the World, we too are called to reflect that light. Do you struggle to let your light shine? How is God challenging you to shine your light? Have you committed yourself to helping this next generation shine the light of Jesus in the world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to walk in the light of your way. Help me to let your light shine boldly in me and through me. Amen.