

Shine: 4. When Jesus Comes
Luke 2:11-12; Matthew 18:1-4
December 24, 2017
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

One of our family's favorite Christmas traditions takes place the day after Thanksgiving, the day we decorate the Christmas tree. By the way, this is my Christmas Tree story. If you come back tonight, you'll get to hear Pastor Steve's Christmas Tree story. In the Luckhardt home, it's a tradition that takes an entire afternoon. We did this for the first time when we moved to Minnesota in 1997 and the tradition was established. We loaded the kids in the car, stopped at McDonald's for lunch, cut the tree from a tree farm in Hampton and then returned home to decorate it. Perhaps one of the most significant parts of the tradition was when each child received an ornament that had been carefully selected to represent a memorable event in their life that past year. Our hope was that when they moved out of our house and started their own Christmas traditions with their own families, they would have ornaments that would remind them of their Christmases past. And our favorite ornaments are not the ones bought from the store but the inexpensive, homemade ones that bear the faces of our children and grandchildren. You see, our children have, indeed, now grown up, left our home and are starting families of their own and they have given us four precious grandsons. And when I look in their faces, I am reminded that this season is not about getting our house ready for Christmas, it's about getting our hearts ready for Jesus.

And this preparation takes place during Advent right here on Sundays, when we gather and pause to remember who we are, whose we are and why we are here. The gift that I want most to share with you is a gift that you can't buy in a store or hang on a tree. It's the gift that was given to us over 2,000 years ago. It didn't come in a stocking but in a stable. A baby who would lay in an animal's feeding trough for his first bed. It's the gift that I desperately want to give my children and grandchildren and to you. The gift of a savior who came to walk among us to show us light, life and love, the things that we all desperately need and want but can't buy. This gift came to us in the most unimaginable, unexpected way and seemingly insignificant way, in the form of a little baby.

Today's scripture is Luke's telling of the Christmas story. It's a quaint, simple story, but it has seismic implications. There's conflict, anticipation, political intrigue and a villain (we heard all about Herod last week). There's tenderness, fear and amazement. It's a great story and it's filled with the unexpected.

God uses unexpected places to transform the world. The focus of this story is not on Rome or Syria, the political hot spots of the first century, but instead, the City of Bethlehem, the City of David. To the Romans and Syrians it carried no clout at all. It was only significant to the Jews. Or, how about an unexpected place like a manger, a cattle trough for a bed? And, don't forget the pasture where the shepherds first heard the story. There is nothing special about a sheep pasture. But when God comes near even the unexpected places become significant.

Luke not only tells us about unexpected places, but he also tells us about unexpected people. The story opens with mentions of Caesar and Quirinius. They were the movers and shakers of the day, the E.F. Huttons, and when they spoke, people listened. Do you remember that commercial? But, Luke turns to a different cast of characters to tell the story. A young couple from Nazareth named Mary and Joseph. There was nothing overtly significant about them. Luke tells us about the shepherds. Shepherds were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Outcasts. Misfits. Persons who could not find "normal" work. They were known as liars, degenerates and

thieves. Their duties kept them from observing the Sabbath so they were considered sinners by the virtue of their vocation. And then there was the innkeeper, so insignificant that he was not even mentioned by name. But when God shows up, even the nameless find significance, meaning and purpose. These people parallel a connection to the marginalized, the lowly, the common and often unacceptable people of first century Judea that will be present throughout Jesus' ministry. They remind us that these are the very people who Jesus will invite to be part of the Kingdom of God. When God shows up, the unexpected can be transformed into a powerful part of God's story.

And Luke includes an unlikely event right in the center of the story, the birth of a baby. Babies are born every day. What is so special about this birth? This birth was anything but normal. This birth was a fulfillment Scripture. This birth was a virgin conception and birth. This birth was God breaking into time and changing all history. This birth, so seemingly insignificant at the time, was the wisdom of God at work. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

Our ultimate journey in life is not to follow who and what the world deems important, but to aim higher, to have a spiritual quest for God and a child-like faith that can lead us to the unexpected. The magi last week, Mary and Joseph and the shepherds this week had faith in a process... faith like a child, and they went seeking and finding, trusting in things not seen. They went looking for a King of the Jews and found someone different. They went looking for a King's palace and instead, unexpectedly, found something simple, something humble. When God shows up, the unexpected events of life are transformed from seemingly insignificant occurrences to holy moments that change the world.

God deliberately chose the form of a child as God's chief identity to be introduced to you and me and to the world. Why would the Creator of the Universe choose this manner in which to be born, to forgo the glory of heaven and relinquish all power so to take on something so powerless and so vulnerable as a tiny human being? Scripture says that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Author Max Lucado says it this way:

It all happened in a moment, a most unremarkable moment. As moments go, that one appeared no different than any other. If you could somehow pick it up off the timeline and examine it, it would look exactly like the ones that have passed while you have read these words. It came and it went. It was preceded and succeeded by others just like it. It was one of the countless moments that have marked time since eternity became measurable.

But in reality, that particular moment was like none other. For through that segment of time a spectacular thing occurred. God became a man. While the creatures of earth walked unaware, Divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself and placed her most precious one in a human womb.

The omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He who had been spirit became pierce-able. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And he who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.

God as a fetus. Holiness sleeping in a womb. The creator of life being created.

God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls and floated in the amniotic fluids of his mother.

God had come near.

He came, not as a flash of light or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were unmanicured, calloused, and dirty.

No silk. No ivory. No hype. No party. No hoopla.

Were it not for the shepherds, there would have been no reception. And were it not for a group of star-gazers, there would have been no gifts.

The first moment of transformation went unnoticed by the world.... But that one moment is all the time it will take to change this world. © Max Lucado/God Came Near, Thomas Nelson, 1986,2004

One seemingly insignificant moment was all it took for light to break through the darkness. And because of that light, darkness will never prevail.

Jesus was one person who came to show love, carry it into the world and change the world one person at a time. And we can do the same. But “anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.” So I want to ask you this question, how do you treat those around you? Your family members, coworkers, friends, neighbors, strangers? There are times when each of us feels overwhelmed by life and try as we might, we just cannot see our own way forward. Darkness, fear and hate creep into our lives. We can get so overwhelmed with the circumstances of life that we cannot even offer a kind word and we say and do things we regret. And when we feel like we are in the deepest, darkest valleys of life and we simply cannot do life alone any longer, God is with us through people to come alongside us and help us. We call these people “stretcher bearers”. They carry us when we cannot carry ourselves. You know what I’m talking about. I see you do it all the time, in the way you care and serve one another. When you do this, you are practicing love towards others and bearing the light of Christ to the world. I believe that people will not be able to listen to the Gospel until they are able to see the Gospel at work in their lives.

At our Candlelight Christmas worship services tonight, we will remember the idea that darkness is all around us but that Christ came to break through that darkness and bring light. All of the lights in the room will be extinguished and one light, the Christ candle, will remain lit. We’ll hear these words from the gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and the light was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5) God became incarnate, flesh and blood in a baby named Jesus. God came and walked

among us to show us this light. This is just one light but tonight, as we sing Silent Night, the Light of Christ will be passed from person to person, and the room will fill with light. And when we receive the light that is passed to us, it will be our way of saying, "I want the light of Christ to live in me. I want to be a light bearer for Christ; to be moved by the power of Holy Spirit to push back the darkness and take this light to the world." And when all of the candles are lit we will lift them high. This is one of the most peace-filled, hope-filled, powerful moments of Christmas, the true light of Christ spreading, one person at a time bringing hope to a dark and hurting world.

Who does Jesus say that he is? He says "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." And when we follow Jesus, who does he say we are? He says, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

You, Church, are Christ's light bearers to the world and there is strength in your numbers. You do it when you serve like you served last Sunday at the Living Nativity, extending warm, welcoming hospitality to guests. You do it when you serve meals at the Simpson Shelter, and when you read to children at Bloom, Oakwood Elementary School and Inner Faith Outreach. You do it when you pack meals at Feed My Starving Children and Second Harvest, or when you rake someone's yard. You will have the opportunity to do it through our Christmas Miracle Offering. This offering will provide scholarships for Bloom families who cannot afford childcare and also go to purchase supplies to pack 5,000 health kits on January 15, that will be sent to persons in Puerto Rico. And the list goes on and on. One person at a time, sharing the love of Christ with one person at a time to change the world!

So here is my question for you today. Will you bear the Light of Christ so to see God in unlikely people, places and events? Can you make this world a brighter place, more filled with light and hope and love because you are here? The baby born at Bethlehem was born for those who have felt insignificant for so long that they have given up on God. We all know people so down, so angry so defeated that they cannot even come to worship this Christmas. Will you be the light of the world that goes out to find them, in the fields and workplaces and neighborhoods, sharing the good news of great joy? Jesus is asking us to accept his light and to live in his light and to take his light to the world.

Let us pray: God, we thank you that your light overcomes the darkness in our world, that in the midst of our darkness, Christ is the light and promises to walk with us, never leaving or forsaking us. He himself overcame sin, hate and death through his resurrection and through the grave. Thank you for calling us to be a city on a hill, an instrument of your light, so that family, friends and neighbors who are walking in dark places can see. We choose again today to walk with you and to let our light shine for all to see until Jesus comes. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 24, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Holy God of Love, there is light in our lives because of the abundance of your steadfast love. A love so vast, so deep, so real, that you became one of us. May we live within the power of this love. And may we share its light with a world where too many dwell in darkness. Amen.

Monday, December 25

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Observation: Christmas is one key story about God's Great Reversal. Caesar Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, issued a decree that forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with Mary nine months pregnant. Jesus, the true God become human, spent his first night on earth in a humble animal shelter in Bethlehem. On Christmas Day, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God's kind of power—the power of selfless love.

Application: Scholar William Barclay wrote, hauntingly, "That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it. His search—and his rejection—go on." What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year? How are you making room in your heart, and in your life, for him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were born in a stable, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.

Tuesday, December 26

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Observation: "A child is born to us," said Isaiah's prophesy, "a son is given to us." His words of hope rang through the years. "He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." Maybe life's darkness wasn't permanent. In the hope of that amazing,

unique birth, the promise that people walking in darkness would see “a great light” seemed worth hoping for.

Application: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.” It was, and is, an awesome promise. Yet even after meeting Jesus, Paul could write, “Now we see a dim reflection” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already lit up your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full glory of God’s light?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, just as the sun rises every morning, your light is always there to illumine my life. Help me keep my vision alert and focused for what your light seeks to show me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 27

Scripture: John 9:1-17

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked. He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.” “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided. Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

Observation: When John wrote that “the life [Jesus] was the light for all people” (John 1:4), he followed Jesus’ lead. Jesus said in the Temple that he was the light of the world (cf. John 8:12), and repeated the claim in verse 5 of today’s reading. His healing of this blind man was like a life-changing, acted-out parable. Jesus’ light gave the beggar back both his physical and spiritual sight.

Application: At what age or stage of life did Christ’s light first shine into your life? What are some of the first things that you remember seeing more clearly in the light of Jesus’ love and

grace? What are one or two ways that Christ's light has helped to give you clearer vision in the most recent weeks and months of your walk with him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when something bad happens, I'm tempted to ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" Help me remember what you told your disciples, and to trust your healing light and love even when I'm hurting. Amen.

Thursday, December 28

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A town built 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. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Observation: You can't hide a city that is sitting on top of a hill. Its light in night can be seen for miles around. Likewise, if we live for Christ, we will be that light to world. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) but he also said here, "You are the light of the world."

Application: If we live in the light of Christ, it means not being quiet when we should speak, caring for others, sharing the love of Christ with a hurt and broken world.

Prayer: Loving God, I want to live in the light. I cannot give into this darkness, fear, hate or any other way that the darkness creeps into my life. I want to be a torchbearer for Christ for all the world to see. Amen.

Friday, December 29

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Observation: We're used to seeing dignified, noble shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, most people looked down on shepherds. Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't carefully observe all the rituals it took to be "holy." But God loved them, and made these shepherds the first to hear the "wonderful joyous news for all people."

Application: In verses 9-10, the shepherds were terrified, and the angel told them, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you." Have you ever felt fear when you faced something unexpected or unexplainable? In what parts of your life do you need to hear anew the wonderful, joyous news of Jesus, and to take in the message "Don't be afraid"?

Prayer: Lord, by my world's standards, it was odd that you'd declare the good news first to shepherds. But you chose well—the shepherds listened, and worshipped. This Christmas day I join the shepherds in worshipping you. Amen.

Saturday, December 30

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Observation: Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John's gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw "the Word" (Greek *logos*) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified "*the logos*" as the world's guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking (cf. Psalm 33:6), and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said "Wisdom" was with God at creation. Yes, said John—coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus—cf. John 1:14) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

Application: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (verse 5). God did not shun our darkened world, but came to live here—and in this world, Jesus' life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. Have there been times when it seemed that darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God's light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

Prayer: God of life and light, I begin this new year in hope—hope that I will find the light and life that Jesus offers me. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.