

The Holy Light of Christmas
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2009, 10:30 p.m.
Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora
The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good evening! Merry Christmas!

How many times have you heard this story – Luke’s version of the birth of the Messiah? More importantly, how do you hear this story tonight? After all the years of hearing it, does it ever get old? I’ve heard it more time than I can count, I know it’s coming, and still, when I read it or hear it again, it gives me goosebumps. Do you? Do you feel a lightness, a brightness touch you deep inside, perhaps even touch your very soul? Does it connect you to other moments in your life when you felt you were encountering something precious and good?

Did you happen to notice how much “light” there is in the story? Like a Stephen Spielberg movie, every version of the story is riddled right through with dazzling, extraordinary light. Luke’s version is filled with angels – those messengers of God who seem to be creatures of pure light – three times they appear, building in power and glory, as the message they bring grows in importance and brightness.

First, an unnamed angel speaks to Zechariah announcing the birth of John the Baptist; next, the archangel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce God’s favor on her in being chosen to become the mother of God’s child; and finally, in this trinity of angelic appearances tonight we hear of how, in the dark of a middle-eastern night long before electricity was harnessed to artificially brighten the night, an angel, soon joined by “a multitude of the heavenly host”¹ illuminate the darkness, radiating with God’s brilliant light, as the message moves from the personal to the public. What had been a family matter is now ready to be shared with the world. The light is growing.

Matthew’s version gives us angels, as well, and it includes the story of a star so bright in the Eastern sky, that wise men – who are learned enough to pay attention to the lights in sky – wise men from other nations are invited to be a part of the extraordinary events unfolding in the little town of Bethlehem.

Mark’s account does not have a story about Jesus’ birth, but skips right to Jesus, the young man and his Baptism, when the heavens open, and the Spirit descends upon him like a dove – which must have been bright, and filled with light.

John wrote in poetry, bringing us back to Genesis, back to the very beginning, using the first words of scripture, “In the beginning.” John reminds us of our genesis, knowing full well that God’s first act of creation was light. “Let there be light”² are the very first Words to issue from God. “In the beginning,” John writes, “was the Word, and the Word was with God, and

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version.* Luke 2:13.

² *Ibid.* Genesis 1:3.

the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . . The true light, which enlightens every one, was coming into the world.”³

In her Christmas message this year, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori reflects on this quality of holy light intersecting the ages, as she writes, “What we have waited long for, ages and eons for, has been born among us. He comes among us quietly, almost stealthily, in an obscure barn, long ago. This child holds all our hope for light. This tiny frame seems too frail to bear our yearning. Yet the nations come streaming to this light even before he is weaned. The divine has come to dwell in our midst, and God’s eternal promise of peace, restoration, and home is made flesh.”⁴

From the remote little town in Judea, known as Bethlehem, the light has passed from angels, a star, and God incarnate, Jesus to the apostles, to the church, to the world. It’s done so from hand to hand, person to person, generation to generation, often in the most unlikely people, beginning with a small and modest family, spreading to shepherds and wise men, turning up in outsiders and oddballs like John the Baptist, through common ordinary folks like fishermen, and outcasts like tax collectors, down through the ages, through poor folks who became nuns and monks, humble women and men, often working on the margins, far from the centers of power, generally shunning any recognition for themselves. But busy, tending the sick, visiting the lonely, offering the prayers for all of us, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger – offering the light to those in need, who would receive it.

God’s holy light entices us, enchants us at Christmas, dances through our lives, invites us to open our hearts to carry it, and pass it on. If we look, we can see how, even in lives seemingly enveloped in darkness, how the light has always been there, offering hope often in the most unlikely places. We are invited to take it, offer it a home, and then share it freely with the world. If we try to keep it, if we hold onto it too tightly, it slips between our fingers. Gone. If, however, we accept it lovingly, in that same spirit that it’s offered, it enlightens us, it fills us with light, every one of us. It gives meaning to our lives, it gives direction and purpose to even the most powerless, the most confused, the saddest, loneliest, hungriest among us.

Now. If we are troubled by doubts, do not fear. Doubts are not an obstacle to faith, doubt is an essential piece of the journey. Test everything, Paul reminds us, and you will know the truth by their fruits. If what you pursue produces life-giving, good, and worthy effects, hang on tight to it. If your pursuits lead to dead ends, take you to bad places, and surround you with glittering but shallow, ultimately empty and worthless fruits for all your best efforts, you will know that too. Let that go. Stay true to the path that produces fruits that shine from within, let go of the meaningless shells that simply reflect light, but offer no warmth or glow of their own.

What is most precious, what is most meaningful, what is most life-giving, is often overlooked in a world intoxicated by glamour, by what’s has the veneer of beauty – skin deep.

³ *Ibid.* John 1:1-5, 9.

⁴ The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, “Christmas Message 2009.” As published on the Episcopal Church website: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/78703_117552_ENG_HTM.htm

The precious, meaningful, and life-giving moments, activities, and people in our lives may be outwardly flawed, frail, easily overlooked by societal standards. Who, today in this country, for instance, would have thought that a little baby born to an unimportant, un-connected, working-class middle-Eastern family – so unimportant that they were shut out at the hotels, given to sleep with the animals, given to bring a child into the world among the animals – would transform the world? Would save us from the worst parts of ourselves? That such a one would be the light of the world?

Sometimes it's hard to see the light. Sometimes the confusion, the fear, the anger, the hurt, and the anguish we suffer make it very hard. Yet Canadian poet and songwriter, Leonard Cohen, no stranger to the darkness, sings -- almost in spite of his own cynicism -- "There is a crack. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."⁵ The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

Bishop Jefferts Schori concludes her Christmas message, asking, "Where and how will you seek out this light of the world? In what other frail frames will light expunge darkness? The light grows with our own eager searching, light reaching out to light, divine reflection yearning for its source."⁶ To which I would humbly suggest adding, How will we take our turn – like the humble women and men of old, like God coming to us as helpless human baby, born not to safety, ease, and comfort, but exposed to the elements, surrounded by the raw, untamed world – how will we risk becoming vulnerable, trusting in God's immeasurable goodness and love for us?

Using the bishop's words, let us join in her prayer for us and for the world: "*May the light of Christ light our way in the darkness. May his light spread through nations besieged by war and hunger. May we continue to search out his light in the dark places of our own hearts.*"⁷ Amen. *May your Christmas shine with God's holy light in the joys of peace, and wonder, and love. Amen.*

⁵ Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," from the album *The Future*. Copyright 1992 Leonard Cohen Stranger Music, Inc. (BMI). Released on Columbia Records.

⁶ Jefferts Schori, *op cit*.

⁷ *Ibid*.