

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

We all bring lots of feelings and expectations with us as we approach Christmas Day. It doesn't matter how young we are or how old we are. We bring with us memories of Christmases gone by and we bring with us hope for Christmases yet to come. For some of us, Christmas is a very wistful time as we remember Christmas through the prism of perfect memories. The ones that have passed almost always seem to be the perfect ones...the ones almost impossible to replicate. But we know when we look back our memories are shaped by the dreams we had and are punctuated by the ones that came true. We tend not to remember the disappointments. Our culture doesn't do much for those of us that find the Christmas season painful rather than joyful. But that's the reality. There is pain and loss in every life. There are dreams that don't come true and losses that crowd out the present moment. The magnitude of this night...the importance of this event...is so overwhelming that not only are our memories a bit skewed but so are our expectations. And if we're young, we have all kinds of expectations...some realistic and some not. When we're young the story of Jesus and the thrill of Santa Claus seem to get all mixed up together. It takes years, sometimes, for us to sort it all out. It can still be confusing even when we are grown up. But one thing is for certain...this is a VERY special night. This is a VERY special occasion. This is the night that changed the world forever.

It's hard for us to imagine a world in which Jesus is unknown...in which Jesus hasn't happened yet. We are so thoroughly informed about him and all that he did and his hope for all people, that it's hard to imagine a world without him...even if we struggle from time to time to embrace him. The world without him is a world that is just too far away and yet Isaiah in his prophecy that we have just heard gives us a glimpse of what that world was like. The people walked in darkness. Think about that for a minute. They had no hope. They had no inspiration of a creator who loved and cared for them. They had no sense of purpose in struggling to choose the right rather than the wrong. They held no illusions about what came after this life. They were certain that it was nothing. They were sure that when this life was over, we stopped existing. It was as if each life had never been here at all. It was not a very uplifting time. And while the Israelites believed in God and prayed to God and worshipped God, their experience of God was far from what it became when Jesus entered the world. They walked in darkness before he came into the world. And we all know what darkness can be like. Most of us were a little bit afraid of the dark when we were children. We weren't sure what was there lurking in the dark. When we

can't see very well, we can imagine all kinds of monsters roaming about ready to pounce on us. And we don't know where the obstacles are because we can't see them until we run into one. These feelings and experiences are not confined to childhood. There are plenty of adults who don't see obstacles until they run into one. There are plenty of adults who imagine all kinds of horrible things when they can't see around them...when they are left in the dark. Being in the dark can be a scary place no matter what our age. But when Jesus came, it was like flipping on a switch. For the first time people who choose to can see things in a new light. They can see what's real and what is shadow. They can identify obstacles before they collide with them. Jesus is the light of the world. He became the difference between day and night.

Isaiah talks about the effect that Jesus will make on the world. There will be a tremendous sense of relief. There will be hope of a personal relationship with God. There will be hope in peace coming to the world they knew. Their sense of oppression would be lifted from them and they will know freedom like they've never known it before. When Jesus came into the world, he wasn't everything that every person had imagined he would be. But there is no doubt that he did bring hope with him. He brought all kinds of hope for all kinds of people. And he brought light with him...the kind of light that illuminates the darkest corners in our lives. The kind of light that dispels so many of our fears once we can see clearly. And the kind of light that sometimes makes us want to hide our eyes because we don't want to see what the light reveals to us about ourselves.

There was...and is...the great promise in Jesus' birth. There were many expectations about what he would do and how he would do it. Some of those expectations were realistic and some of them were pure fantasy and wishful thinking...not unlike our visions of Santa Claus and our expectations of Christmas itself. His mission was not clear to many people who had pre-conceived notions of who the Messiah would be and how he would behave. Jesus' mission was to provide us with an experience of God. To show us what loving behavior actually looks like. He performed miracles that changed people's lives and circumstances. He was faithful to the Father who sent him and he was faithful to the mission that he was sent to accomplish.

Each year when Christmas rolls around, we tend to put great store in lighting things up...we light up the tree; we light up the wreath on the front door; we burn candles in the Advent Wreath; and we light candles to remember those we've loved and lost. The wise men came several months after Jesus' birth, but they were guided by a magnificently bright star. It seems even God was obsessed with lighting things up to celebrate the entry of Jesus into the world.

This is the night. This is the night that changed the world. And we begin our remembrance of this night in the dark. The sun has gone down and it's more difficult to see. It reminds us of

what the world was like all that time before Jesus entered it. We can see the moon which is like the hope of the coming Messiah. And we can see the stars that are those little random and unconnected acts of love and compassion that give us glimpses of hope that we are not always going to be in the dark. When Jesus arrived, we began to have periods of daylight provided by him...insight into the real meaning of love...insight into the power of God...insight into the restoration to God's good graces that Jesus provided for us.

This is the night. The night that changed the world forever. The night that set us on a path toward a relationship with God that would not have been possible had Jesus not come to be with us...to take on our human form, to love us, to heal us, and to provide for us a pathway back to the God man had only guessed about until Jesus came to live and love among us. The difference between then and now is like the difference between remaining in a dark room and flipping on the switch. Jesus is the light that shines through when God flipped on that switch.

No matter what our expectations are...of life in general or of Jesus and God in particular...God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our needs as well as our wants and God always provides what's best for us and envelopes us with love when we are hurt or disappointed. Jesus showed us what God's sustaining love can do, so we don't have to live in the dark if we don't want to. And why would we want to? Because of Jesus' birth and life among us in human form, we don't have to! All we have to do is just flip on the switch!!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.