“The Light Shining in the Darkness”

Some years ago a military airplane crashed at an Air Force Base in Greenland. Twenty-two people were killed. The runway and the nearby fields were strewn with bodies. It was a tragic and horrible moment. There was only one chaplain on the base at the time... and the entire burden was laid on him to bring comfort and the Word of God to a shocked community staggered by the horrendous accident. But there was little time to mourn that day. The horrible task of gathering up and identifying the bodies needed to be done.

And so, the chaplain, along with a young lieutenant who had been assigned the duties of a mortuary officer and a group of volunteers went about the awful business of removing and trying to identify, the dead, so that their families and loved ones back home could be notified. It was a heart-breaking and exhausting task, but it had to be done. The chaplain, the lieutenant, and the volunteers worked in shocked silence well into the night until they almost dropped from fatigue. When every last remnant of death had been picked up, they each went silently to their individual rooms.

That night, after midnight, there was a knock on the chaplain's door. Outside stood the young lieutenant, the Mortuary Officer. He said nothing. He just stood there and wept. After some moments, the young lieutenant spoke through his tears and he said to the chaplain, "As we were picking up the bodies today, I realized something. I realized that the only other people out there with us were the people who go to church here. I have always been an unbeliever, and I used to ridicule these same people who were out there with us. Yet they are the only persons who would, or perhaps could, do what we had to do today.” What that young lieutenant was saying was that those people offer hope to the hopeless. How? They carried a light into the darkness.

As the Hebrew scriptures tell us this Advent season, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them has light shined.” Meeting us in our confusion, filling us with divine warmth, guiding us to safety, shining in our dark night, Jesus is still the light of the world.

The Christmas story is a story of light. Light, a powerful metaphor, punctuates and illuminates the stories of that first Christmas; the gospel writer's description of light beckons to
our earliest yearnings, leads us out of the dark and cold to the bright and warmth. The star of Bethlehem shines in the night sky to guide the wise men to the place of Jesus’s birth. The heavenly host, radiant with the brilliance and splendor of God, brings the news of Jesus’s birth to the lowly shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. “And the glory of the Lord shone all around them.” Splendid, shimmering, luminous, magnificent—the Christmas story is a story of light.

But it isn’t just light appearing. The gospel writer makes sure that we know that it is light piercing the deepest of darkness. The setting of the Christmas story is not at 2 in the afternoon. Jesus, born in the middle of the night, comes to us at what the hymnist call bleak midwinter, the moment of the winter solstice—the shortest day and the longest night of the year.

For the first three hundred years of Christianity, Christians celebrated the birth of Christ at different times during the year--March, April, May, and November. Then in the year 350, the pope decided that December 25 would be the official date. This date coincided with a pagan holiday that celebrated the winter solstice festival in Rome.

Imagine with me the setting of Jesus's birth—cold, dark, winter. The gospel writer uses imagery marked by darkness, stillness, clouds moving across a moonless sky, fields deserted, shepherds huddling. Silence, stillness, breathtaking loneliness—those are the images that have forever influenced how we think of that first Christmas. Listen to the words of our Christmas carols:

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining; it is the night of our dear Savior’s birth.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Beneath thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars roll by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old.

It is in this setting—the middle of the night, the longest night of the year, the time of deepest darkness—that Jesus, the light of the world, is born.
Meeting us in our confusion, filling us with divine warmth, guiding us to safety, shining in our dark night, Jesus is still the light of the world.

The language of light and darkness, over the centuries, has given meaning to how we understand God.

Only recently have cities been light up at night. Public illumination was ordered in London in 1417 by Sir Henry Barton, Mayor of London. Paris was first lit by an order issued in 1524, and, in the beginning of the 16th century, the inhabitants were ordered to keep lights burning in the windows of all houses that faced the streets. Lighting in private homes is even more recent. Only the very rich could afford candles until around the year 1800. In large households, a daily ration of candles was often included in your employment conditions.

When night fell, it was dark, very dark. Our ancestors knew the heaviness of darkness in a way that we cannot comprehend. Stephen King, says that he only writes in the morning--never at night. "It is too scary to write at night--with the stuff that comes from my pen." Even Stephen King realizes the power of darkness.

The language of light is the language of our religion. Think of the words we use when we talk about religion—enlightenment, illumination, seeing, awakening, visions, and epiphanies. These words are the common words of Christianity. And the word glory— which means radiance, brightness, luminosity— is often used to demonstrate the presence of the divine.

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The captain of the ship looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message" "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south I am the captain!" Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north I am seaman third class Jones." Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: "Alter your course 10 degrees south I am a battleship." Then the reply came "Alter your course 10 degrees north I am a lighthouse."
In the midst of our dark and bewildered times, all sorts of voices are shouting orders into the night, telling us what to do. Out of the confusion though, comes the one voice we need more than any.

Jesus came to bring light to a world stumbling in the dark. As followers of Jesus, we reflect that same light to the world. When we do the work of Jesus, reflecting God’s light, we will discover that the light within ourselves grows stronger and brighter.

There is the story of the young woman named Sara who spent six weeks one summer along the United States-Mexico border working with an organization called “No More Deaths.” This organization provides humanitarian aid to migrants crossing the desert into the U.S. Over 2000 people have died over the past decade trying to cross into the United States, most from dehydration or exhaustion caused by the oppressive heat and meager supplies. No matter how you feel about this flow of illegal immigration, it is not right by Christian standards that these people, often women and children, have died like this. Sara spent the summer handing out bottles of water and granola bars, binding feet and seeking medical attention for those who had the greatest need. In seeking to let her light shine for Christ, she discovered something unexpected. She discovered a new closeness to God. Her Christian faith grew as she worked with men, women, and children who have been forced to leave everything behind in search of life for their families. She says, “I do not think it is because I am praying more or reading the Bible any more carefully there is just something about being here and doing this that makes it all seem so real to me.”

The light of Jesus that came into the world with his birth is still with us.

Light travels 186,000 miles per second. Using the Hubble telescope, we can see the light from the Eagle Nebula. That light takes 7,000 years to reach the Earth. So energy from those stars has been traveling all that time to reach us and provide its light. The work of the first disciples, 2,000 years ago, still travels to us and reaches us. The effect of the work of the disciples and the early church has traveled through history and touched us. Their light is felt in our lives and in our churches today.

Remember, the light that you and I bring to the world is simply reflected light. Therefore, we cannot grow tired or discouraged with being the light of the world since our
source of light is endless and constantly abundant. The light that we are in the world is Christ-light—and still comes from Jesus. It is the light that will never go out as long as there is breath and life in creation. We will shine the Christ-light in our hearts, in our actions, in our lives forever. Always replenished by the one who came to earth, born in Bethlehem, laid to rest in a manger.

The first Noel, the angel did say,

Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay,

On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

They looked up and saw a star

Shining in the East, beyond them far;

And to the earth it gave great light,

And so it continued both day and night.

Meeting us in our confusion, filling us with divine warmth, guiding us to safety, shining in our dark night, Jesus is still the light of the world.

I owe much of my inspiration and not a few of my ideas to The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Harper Collins e-books, 2014.

I also would like to site Wikipedia, e-sermons illustrations page, and Textweek.com as major help in developing and illustrating this sermon.