

True Light

O God, we thank you for the grace You have made known in Jesus Christ, born this night and always in the hearts of those who love Him.¹ Be present with us now as we listen for Your Word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On this holy night, we rejoice to celebrate a MYSTERY: the darkness of the world yields to the dawn of hope in the birth of Jesus Christ! This night, we explore the MYSTERY of the Incarnation: God, the Creator of the cosmos, was born into the material world, to redeem humanity from sin and to teach us the ways of justice and peace. Tonight the light of Christ, the radiant beacon of God's love, beams through the darkness of this world, guiding us toward healing and truth.

How? you might ask. If God has come among us as Redeemer, why is there still such darkness in the world? Looking at our present moment, looking at history, we might be forgiven for not understanding what it means that the Messiah was born 2,000 years ago in occupied Palestine. How is this true? Fair question. There are answers in our tradition, of course—powerful, theologically rich answers, worthy of a lifetime of devotional study. But on the face of it, the Christian claim of the Incarnation is hard to believe.

The other day, I was browsing Christmas cards to find something that honored our beautiful, fragile planet as the place of the Incarnation of our Lord. I wanted something that struck just the right note of joy at the cosmos-transforming birth of Christ, leavened with urgency about our need to cherish the Earth and embrace our kinship with all living beings. I came across a card that said, “All is calm, all is bright”—the line from the Christmas carol “Silent Night”—and I balked. I did. Surely anyone paying attention to the news these days would find that line willfully naïve. All is not calm in this world! All is not bright! Seriously: what counts as “bright” in this world is so often distorted and harmful.

(#1) Think of the glare of fluorescent lighting in the malls to which countless people make pilgrimage this time of year. Those meccas of capitalism fabricate a brightly lit 24-hour day in which consumers wander through an artificial village, manipulated by the lie that purchasing products is the way to spiritual joy and a meaningful life.

(#2) Or consider the “light” of extractive technologies irradiating our world with the toxic effects of utterly venal exploitation. Fracking—hydraulic mining—devastates ecosystems with its methane and benzene air pollution and its contamination of groundwater for miles around. The tableau of destruction is illuminated by klieg lights focused on the drill machinery 24 hours a day.² The same is true for strip mining and open-pit mining, ecologically disastrous technologies whose operations are lit by “explosion-proof lighting”—yes, that’s a real thing,

“explosion-proof lighting”—so drilling and blasting can continue 24/7 and, you know, investors can see to count their money as biodiversity dies all around them.

(#3) Worst of all, consider the “light” generated by munitions exploding. Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Less than 50 miles away from Bethlehem, in Gaza, nothing is calm. “All is bright” only because of the blinding light of Israeli Defense Force ordnance exploding around terrified Gazan families in the dark of night. In Gaza, “all is bright” only in the infrared beams used by IDF Fireflies, “loitering kamikaze drones”³ that seek out people on the ground and target them for obliteration. As of Friday, more than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, 70% of them women and children.⁴

That’s what passes for light in our present darkness ^{Eph 6:12}:

the artificial dazzle of capitalist manipulation,
the relentless glare of extractive technologies that ravage the planet,
and flashes of death that reduce communities to rubble.

All these kinds of “light” are generated by forces intent on profit and control,

in the name of a peace that is no peace.

That is not the light of the Gospel! That’s light pollution generated by greed and fear and lack of empathy. Make no mistake: the world’s death-dealing artificial light does terrible harm and obscures the deeper illumination of God’s love.

Friends, tonight Luke tells of a different kind of light. As shepherds guard their flock, the glory of the Lord shines all around them, and an angel announces the joyous news: the Messiah—the actual Messiah for whom Israel had yearned for centuries—has been born in Bethlehem! The heavens open and the shepherds are surrounded by glorious music: all the host of heaven singing praises to God!

“But how can this be?”^{1:34} The question Mary asked the archangel Gabriel months earlier^{1:32–35} still hangs in the air. Mary and Joseph had made an arduous four-day journey 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with Mary nine months pregnant, to be “registered” so the extractive imperial machine of Caesar Augustus could tax them.⁵ Mary has labored and given birth in a place for livestock, in occupied Palestine. Her baby has not been born into wealth and political power as a crown prince. But precisely that is the sign the angel gives the shepherds: the baby will be lying in a feeding trough—a manger—not in a royal palace!⁶

The sign means the authority of grace works differently than the authority of imperial domination. That’s the MYSTERY we celebrate this evening! The light of God’s glory is nothing like the false lights of our manipulative, extractive, violent world. No—we celebrate the light of grace! As Second Corinthians teaches, “it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”!²

^{Cor 4:6–7} And the glory of God illumines the path of peace.

The Hebrew prophets knew this. Centuries before Christ, Micah prophesied that a Savior would come from Bethlehem to shepherd his flock, and he would be One of Peace. ^{Mic 5:2-5} Isaiah also foretold it:⁷ “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” Isaiah sings, for “a child has been born for us,” and his name shall be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”!

Isaiah’s 4 names for the child teach us whom we welcome, this Christmas Eve—the One who is born in our hearts and whom we meet at the Communion Table:

[1] פְּלֵא יוֹעֵץ: “Wonderful Counselor” or, better, “Planner of Wonders”:

we welcome a Messiah who works wonders and has planned astonishing miracles since the dawn of time⁸;

[2] אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר: “Mighty God,” the Hebrew yielding even “Warrior God”:

we welcome a Messiah who is champion of the powerless, One who is invincibly strong and mighty to save in the spiritual warfare that assaults us, our communities, and all living beings;

[3] אָבִי עֶד: “Everlasting Father”:

we welcome a nurturing Messiah whose compassion embraces us and holds us up in times of lament, anger, fear, and loss; and the fourth name,

[4] שַׁרְשָׁלוֹם: “Prince of Peace”:

this Christmas Eve, we welcome a Messiah who will bring everything that has ever lived into endless peace, a peace that passes understanding! ^{Phil 4:7}

That's the Messiah we welcome into our hearts and proclaim to the world:
One who is incomparably wise, invincibly strong, and boundlessly
compassionate, who leads the cosmos into endless peace!

That's the truth of what has been, and is, and is to come,
seen in the Light of our gracious God.

And so, on this holy night, rejoice in *that* Light!
In the name of the Incarnate One who is our peace: Jesus Christ,
to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

24 December 2023

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2–7; Psalm 96:1–13; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–20

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ See the Christmas sermon of the Dominican mystic and theologian Johannes Tauler (ca. 1300–1361) on Isaiah 9:5 for the notion that Christ is born continually in the heart of every believer: *Predigten*, Band 1 (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2011), 13–20.

² On fracking, see this [summary of harms](#) in the *Catskill Advocate*, with many links there to other data sources and documented harms.

³ The official name of this military drone is the Rafael Spike FireFly. See details in these pieces from [7 July 2023](#) and [21 December 2023](#).

⁴ This [Reuters report](#), along with other reliable sources, put the Palestinian death toll at 20,057 as of 22 December 2023, estimating that 70% of the casualties are women and children, and noting that thousands of uncounted bodies remain buried under the rubble of structures bombed by the Israeli Defense Force.

⁵ Joel B. Green notes that this mandatory census registration, “a penetrating symbol of Roman overlordship,” seeks to “[assert] Augustus’s sovereignty over the world,” and continues: “Yet the birth of Jesus, God’s Son (1:35), is made known not to the Emperor or even to the Syrian governor, Quirinius, but to peasant shepherds. With the birth of Jesus, the powerful are already being brought down, while the lowly are lifted up” (*The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 121–122).

⁶ Reflecting on Mary’s Magnificat, John T. Carroll observes, “God is the God of status reversal praised earlier by the child’s mother (1:46–55). Samuel found David among the sheep and anointed him king (1 Sam 16); this child who is to sit on David’s throne also begins life in a place for animals and will find honor first among shepherds” (*Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 67).

⁷ Luke cherishes the witness of Isaiah. See Green’s discussion (*Luke*, 134n55) for the many terms Luke has drawn from Isaiah 9:1–7 to create here, as elsewhere in the Third Gospel, rich resonances with the ancient prophetic tradition of God’s redeeming work.

⁸ On the syntactical challenges presented by $\text{פְּלַנֵּי מִוִּנְיָוֹת}$ and the translation “planner of wonders,” see Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, Continental Commentary (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 403; Patricia K. Tull, *Isaiah 1–39*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 198–199. Among biblical passages cited to show that divine power—in God and in God’s Messiah—is known not only in the working of wondrous acts but in the planning of wonders, see Mic 4:9; Isa 11:2; 28:29. For reception history of Isaiah within Judaism and Christianity, see these two works by John F. A. Sawyer: *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Isaiah Through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018). For Jesus Christ as the generative divine Logos active from before the dawn of creation, see John 1:1–18.