

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, December 24, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“THE GREAT LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS”

Isaiah 9:2,3

I am sure you saw many lights on your way here, lights we see only at this time of year, lights of many different colours. Now these lights can remind us of the great light of Christmas. Or they may distract us from seeing that light. I'm sure you noticed our brightly lit nativity scene as you made your way down the courtyard walkway. It's there to remind us of the one who was born this night 2000 years ago, the one who said, "I am the light of the world."

Isaiah prophesied his coming in words we hear every Christmas, "Those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them a light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2) That prophecy was fulfilled when Christ came into the world. But it's also being fulfilled for us now. We have walked in darkness but tonight we see a great light. We lived in a land of darkness but tonight a light shines on us. The great light we see tonight, the light that shines upon us in this hour is Jesus Christ.

Now the darker it is the more brightly a light seems to shine. And if we are going to see the great light tonight we must first recognize the darkness in our world and in our lives. When Isaiah says that the people have walked in darkness he's talking about moral and spiritual darkness. Of course, God did not intend for us to live in this kind of darkness. God created us to be children of light, living in fellowship with God, in peace with one another, and in harmony with God's creation. But humans desired to go their own way and there was a great fall. Now by God's grace, the light was not all obliterated, but darkness did spread throughout the world and enter human hearts. Our relationship with God was broken and distorted. So too was our relationship with one another and with God's creation. People began living and walking in darkness. Even God's chosen people walked in the darkness. Throughout Israel's history the people had enjoyed a close relationship with God. They knew that God had set them apart to be a light to the nations - to give witness to God's power, his holiness, justice and righteousness. But Israel disobeyed God. They deliberately chose their own path, which often led them into darkness.

You see, no one escapes walking in the moral and spiritual darkness Isaiah speaks of. Sometimes it's right in our own community and city in our homes. A father kills a daughter over her choice of clothing. It's so sad when religion turns dark and violent. The darkness

is seen in poverty, disease, injustice, oppression, the strong exploiting the weak, personal and corporate greed and immorality, war. According to Isaiah war is a sign of the world's darkness. And somewhere, sometime we have all walked in darkness, both by our own choice and because of the world's darkness. No one escapes.

To walk in darkness can be very disorienting. The other night I was in my garage and I was lowering the garage door. The door closed before I could open the door to the house. For a few moments I was in total darkness and I felt a sense of disorientation, panic almost. Thankfully, I was close to the door to the house and quickly opened it to a space that was warm and well-lit.

People who have taken a tour in the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky have spoken of something which takes place on the tour. As the group reaches the bottom of the cave, the tour guide begins turning out lights one by one until there is no light at all. The people experience total darkness for a minute or two. They report feeling disoriented, not being able to see their hands in front of them, not knowing where the others are, losing their sense of balance and direction.

Walking in a world of spiritual and moral darkness can do this to us. We lose our bearings and our sense of direction. We don't know who we are and where we are going. Even our God-given sense of right and wrong gets mixed up. We become disconnected from one another. We lose a sense of God's presence. We don't even know where to look for God. Just imagine what the world would be like without light, spiritual and moral light.

Thankfully, God has not left us to walk in the darkness. Even though darkness came into the world, God has always provided a light for us to walk by, a light to guide the peoples of this world in the right direction. This light was first seen in Israel, and though it sometimes grew dim, it never completely went out. But then on a night 2,000 years ago one was born who finally fulfilled these words of Isaiah, "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." We have walked in darkness but tonight we see a great light. We live in a land of deep darkness, but tonight light shines upon us. The great light we see tonight, the light that shines upon us in this hour is Jesus Christ.

Tonight this light shines from a manger in the small town of Bethlehem, where a baby has been born to a virgin mother. The light that fills the sky tonight comes from the child that is born for us, the son given to us who is God's own Son. The light shining from such a tiny place and tiny person tells us a great deal about God and God's desire for us. It tells us that the power of God is the power of love, and that God's power is made perfect in weakness. It tells us that we no longer have to grope after God, as in a dark place. From now on we

know that God is “Emmanuel” - God with us. From now on God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father. This baby will grow to us to be Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But on this dark night he shines from Bethlehem’s manger and overcomes our deepest fears.

Oh, just a few days after his birth the darkness tried to snuff him out. But he was kept safe by God’s providence and grew up to shine throughout his life with the very light and love of God. Finally, on a dark day in Jerusalem the power of evil nailed him to a Cross and he seemed to be snuffed out once and for all. But the Father raised him from the dead to be alive forevermore. Indeed, his death and resurrection became the act by which God saves us. So no matter how dark the world becomes, no matter what darkness we may walk in, there is always a great light for us to see, a light that forever shines upon us. That light is Jesus Christ.

Yes, Christ lights up our sin and the shadowed corners of our lives and our world. Nothing is hidden from his light. But he does this, not to condemn us, but rather to save us and to redirect our steps in the way of God. The light of Christ that shines upon us tonight is a warm light, an inviting light, a light of forgiveness, of grace, of new beginnings, of hope.

In those Kentucky caves, as the people stand in darkness, the tour guides says, “Now what would happen if we had a power failure down here and we couldn’t turn the lights back on? How would we get out? Well, let me show you,” he says. He takes a single match and lights it. The light of that one single match fills the large cave, and provides enough light for all the tourists to follow the narrow path back to the surface. Visitors describe that light as transforming, transfixing. They say they are unable to take their eyes off of it.

The great light we see tonight, the light that shines upon us in this hour is Jesus Christ. Look to him and be transformed. He is welcoming us by the warm glow of his redeeming love. He is beckoning us with the promise of peace with God and with one another. He is leading us forward in the way of God, the way of love and justice and peace. He is leading us from darkness into his glorious light, empowering us to give witness to the light that is in Him. He is bringing us home to God now and for eternity. He is the light who shines in the darkness, the light the darkness cannot put out.

And that light shines in even the most unlikely places. United States Presidential hopeful John McCain tells about an incident which he says saved his life when he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. McCain was forced to kneel for hours at a time, his arms tied behind him. But there was a certain guard who as he began his shift, always approached McCain, put his finger to his lips to signal silence, then loosened the ropes. As his shift ended he would tighten them again. Weeks later, when McCain was allowed to stand outside in the sunshine

on Christmas Day, the same guard approached him, stood silently and drew a cross in the dirt with his sandal. He then erased it and walked away. "I'll never forget that individual," McCain says.

"Those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them a light has shined." We have walked in darkness but tonight we see a great light. We have lived in a land of deep darkness, but in this hour a light shines upon us. The great light we see tonight, the light that shines upon us in this hour is Jesus Christ.

Come now to that light, putting all of your trust in him as you receive the symbols of his broken body and shed blood. Let him lead you in the paths of life from this night forth and forevermore. Look to him and you will always have a light to walk by. For Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."