

A Great Light

Christmas Eve

Sermon

- The **Sermon** is delivered by the pastor:

P The soldier lay in the hole he had crawled into at sunset. The cold night settled over him and an eerie silence shrouded the battlefield. The place of fire and fury had become an icy tomb.

He needed to move, to get back to his lines, to rejoin the others. But which way? He had no idea. Turned and turned again during the fighting, running and often falling—now in the darkness, he was completely lost—as lost as he had ever been—as lost as anyone can be. Going the wrong way could cost him his life. Not going at all could mean freezing, capture or worse.

He tried to pray. The words didn't seem to come. He had not prayed much in the years since he left home. Somehow God had slipped away ...

“Pray. Prayer. What prayer?” The word brought a clear picture of his mother to his mind. Every evening she would gather the family by “the altar”—she called it. And there on an old table with a piece of white cloth on it, she would light a candle and they would pray. He always thought it such a bother, so silly, all of them praying on their knees in front of a broken-down table and a old, bent candle.

“I don't need this!” he would grumble—more and more as he got older.

“Just come and pray,” she would say.

“But what for?”

“Some day,” she would say, “it will light your way.”

The darkness pressed on him. “God remember me,” he muttered. “God help me.” Stumbling prayers. Not what they should be. What else could he say?

He waited for an answer, but there was nothing but night and silence and cold. Finally, he raised his head just above the edge of the hole and squinted into the gloom. There! Off there, barely visible in the mist he saw a flame—a single, silent flame.

What was it? Could he trust it? Could he follow it? There was nothing else to do. He began to crawl toward the flame, toward the tiny, flickering flame.

After what seemed like hours he broke into a clearing. There were the others, soldiers he knew, huddled around a little fire.

“Hey soldier,” his sergeant whispered. “Where have you been? You look a little lost.”

The fire still peeked at him between the gathered figures in the darkness.

“The fire,” he muttered.

The sergeant came closer. “Just a little while ago, the captain said we could risk one small fire to help keep warm. But we’ve got to put it out soon. The enemy ...”

The soldier got to his knees and stared at the flame in wonder. “It looked like a candle. From out there—from out there in darkness, it looked like an old, bent candle I used to know.”

(Pause)

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone” (Isaiah 9:2). The soldier in our story certainly was in the dark. Darkness surrounded him, trapped him, held him captive. Left on his own, he had no idea where he was, where he could go, where he would be safe. Confusion. The darkness describes our story, the story of all of us. On our own, we are left in the spiritual darkness of this world. It is a deep darkness, a blinding darkness, a darkness that we cannot overcome on our own. We have the illusion that we can make our own light. We think we can find the way, make our own way by the light of our intelligence, our wisdom, our inborn ability to be light to ourselves. But we are no more able to create our own light than was the soldier in the story. All of us are lost in the darkness of sin and we cannot fix it, make our own light. Our spiritual situation is no different from the soldier lost on the battlefield. We know there is a path ahead that will lead to life. But where is it? How do we find it? That’s where the flame comes in. This Christmas celebration is not just a happy time to give and receive gifts, decorate the house, recite the Christmas story. This is the time we celebrate the light that has been placed in our life and in our future. Indeed, it is God’s light. “(We) are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:24-25).

A pastor was teaching a confirmation lesson on the work of the Holy Spirit and the concept of

the Church. This lesson included the confirmation students and their parents as well. After discussing the importance of the work of God's Spirit, and why he gathers us into a fellowship of faith, the pastor gave each person an unlit candle and asked the group to stand in one big circle. Someone turned out all the lights. The room went totally dark, and even though there were more than a dozen or so people in the room, because of the darkness each felt very much alone.

After being in that darkness for a while, the pastor lit a candle. He then lit the candles of those standing on either side of him. Slowly the light was passed from one to the next. Gradually the light in the room grew. But what the participants noticed was not so much the light growing as the darkness receding. The darkness was being replaced by light. After the light had been passed all around, some observed that while each only had one light, that light, combined with the others in the church, caused the darkness to recede.

While the pastor was talking about this light, a helper went around and blew out first one candle, then another. The pastor explained that this is what Satan wants. At times we are attacked and the light of our faith grows dim or even goes out. Each time this happened, the one standing next to the person with the extinguished candle reached over and quickly relit it. This is the work of the Church in action, one believer reaching out and helping another believer who is caught in darkness.

Indeed, we are those who walked in darkness, at least we were destined to before we were received into God's kingdom by Baptism. We are now his own, marked with the cross of Jesus Christ and filled with the light that is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We have a light that will guide us through life and bring us to eternal life.

Certainly, we can turn away from the light. In fact, for all of us, there are times when the light seems to fade. But the Spirit does not leave us. We simply wander into what we think we want or what we deserve. Clearly, because of our sin, we deserve nothing but judgment and separation from God. But Jesus acts for us. He goes to the cross for us. He gains forgiveness and life for us and offers it to us as a gift. We can always, always return to the light, the candle, in prayer and in desperation.

Gifted children of God, we now walk by faith, by the light of faith in a dark and dismal world. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16). The one who is the light of the world, now names us the light of the world. We become light by the grace of God. We give off light, not just keep it for ourselves. We can no more hide the Good News of God's salvation in Jesus than can we hide the spiritual light that is now in us.

Darkness—sin, death, evil—still exist and will always exist in this life. Christmas is the story of how light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it. The light that shines allows us to see through the darkness the shadows of the love, grace, and hope that have found us. The flickering light provides us a glimpse of the companions that hold our hands, kiss our lips and walk with us, in hope, away from all that would close our future and destroy life, toward the amazing power of God’s love let loose in the world. Shine, Jesus, shine.

This is the Christmas message of joy. “You are the light of the world ...” (Matthew 5:14). The lights of Christmas remind us that the light of God’s salvation has come as a baby in a manger. And the lights of Christmas remind us that we are light to those who still sit in darkness. The light is only complete as we give it away and shine it on the gift of life that comes to us, sets us on fire and makes us into lights to guide and lead the lost ones to the light of life.