

## ***"Rejoicing in the Light"***

Christmas Eve -2011

Rev. Robert H. Wade

Luke 2:1-20

Exactly a week ago tonight, Connie and I were rejoicing in the lights of Clifton Mill! Our son and daughter-in-law, Ben and Angie, were also with us to see the dazzling light show of 3.5 million multi-colored lights covering the mill, the bridge, every tree and bush, including a 100 foot waterfall of lights alongside the river. To top it off, every half hour the lights come alive, dancing to the playful music of Mannheim Steamroller's *"Carol of the Bells."*

On our way home, after a quick stop at Krogers, we came upon another *Light Show* across from Fairhaven Church on Whipp Road. We pulled into Fairhaven's parking lot and tuned our radio to 98.1 FM and were awed by a light show that completely enveloped a light lover's home. And the light show was perfectly synchronized to songs of Christmas like *"Joy to the World," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "What's This?"* from the movie The Nightmare Before Christmas. Last Saturday night was filled with rejoicing in the lights.

Throughout our light filled evening, I kept thinking, *"these lights are exceptional but they don't compare to the rejoicing that will take place in another six months when Angie gives birth to her first child and our third grandchild."* There are awesome moments of rejoicing in *light shows* but many *light shows* are fleeting and soon fade away. However, there are life changing events that call forth an eternal rejoicing in the light! And the birth of a child is one of those events! Congratulations *Ben* and *Angie!* You will make wonderful parents and we join you in rejoicing in the light of the birth of your first born.

On this Christmas Eve we have to come to join with the eternal chorus in rejoicing in the light born in Bethlehem's manger, a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. This baby's birth was announced to the Shepherds by an angel, ***"Do not be afraid;***

*for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*

Following the angel's announcement of "good news of great joy" a light show like no other light show pierced the darkness of those Bethlehem hills, "***And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'***" As the heavens rejoiced in the Light, the Shepherds "***went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.***" The heavenly light show directed the Shepherds to the baby who would grow up and declare of himself, "***I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.***" (John 8:12)

I have always found great hope in Jesus' promise, "***Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.***" But from where I live I see a lot of darkness. Darkness in the form of untimely deaths, unwanted illnesses, unreconciled relationships, unwanted strife, bitterness, anger and anxiety. Our TVs and newspapers continually barrage us with scenes of darkness in the form of terrorist bombings, murders, moral corruption, ecological destruction and the powerful taking advantage of the weak. But I also see darkness within myself. Things I know I shouldn't think, say or do, I do, and things I know I should think, say and do, I don't do. Maybe you also see areas of darkness within yourselves? *Who will deliver us from this pervasive darkness?* Jesus said, "***I am the light of the world.***" Thanks be to God!

Thanks be to God for this evening's opportunity to rejoice in the Light who claimed that those who follow him will never walk in darkness. Wow! That's quite an assertion!! *What do you make of Jesus' claim? Is Jesus saying we will never experience darkness in any way, shape or form? We'll never have accidents? Become ill? Say something stupid that we regret the moment it flies from our tongues? Never have money worries? Never stress about family, business, or peace in the world? "***Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.....***" What does that mean to you?*

During Advent many in our church have been reading *Adam Hamilton's* book, ***"The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem"*** which has fostered some wonderful discussion and imaginative ponderings. Hamilton invites his readers to use their imagination to ponder the behind the scenes interactions, feelings, and ups and downs of the people in the Christmas story.

For instance, remember how Mary humbly proclaimed, ***"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*** (Luke 1:38) You will find no better statement of faith in the entire Bible. While celebrating Mary's faithful response, Hamilton also invites us to imagine Mary's inner dismay as she was told about the forced journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. This meant an unwanted ten day trek over incredibly rugged terrain while Mary was in her ninth month of pregnancy! *How do you think Mary would have felt and what do you think she was thinking?*

Quite honestly I had never thought much about the personal and emotional back story of the Christmas story. But this is how Hamilton imagined Mary may have responded to God about the sudden change in her birthing plans: ***"I picture Mary breaking down in tears and shouting, 'God, how could you? You came and asked me to bear this child, and I agreed. I said, 'Here I am, the handmaiden or the Lord.' I took on the shame that went with a hurried marriage, enduring the looks and whispers as I walked by the people in the community. And now, I won't be able to have my baby in Nazareth? You had to take that away too? Why is this happening? What did I do that was so wrong? Why, God? Why did you not change the emperor's mind? Why did you not protect me from this? How can you let this happen?"*** (P. 88)

This might fly in the face of your view that people of faith never question, are always serene and peaceful, that people of faith never doubt, fear or become angry at God. But it makes sense to me. *Have you ever felt disappointed with God? Have you ever been angry with God?* I have and I appreciate Hamilton's realism as he invites us to understand Mary's dismay: ***"What is a young woman, nine months pregnant, a jumble of hormones, going to feel as she hears once more that the one thing she thought she could control--where she would give birth and who would be with her--was now being stripped away by an emperor's edict in Rome?"*** (P. 89)

Surely there had to have been a certain amount of darkness surrounding Mary and Joseph's arduous trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph were most certainly following God but God did not provide a luxury motor coach for their journey nor did God remove the barren wilderness. It was a long, grueling and unwanted grind. Hamilton made the point that many of the stories of the Bible are unwanted journeys of people following what they believed to be God's direction yet, along the way, they were often confronted by difficulty and darkness.

I have a hunch most of us can identify with unwanted journeys! Connie and I received a Christmas letter from a dear friend who has certainly been on an unwanted journey this past year. **Shirley Dixon**, who lives in Tribune, Kansas, has been a friend of my family for many years. Shirley and my Dad were co-camp counselors at our presybtery's Camp Lark decades ago while I was still in college and seminary. Lo and behold, God called me to become pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Tribune, Kansas, as my first church and the Dixon family was one of the reasons I so enjoyed my first pastorate.

We still receive the Greeley County Republican weekly newspaper from Tribune, just so we can keep up with friends from yesteryear. Last summer we read that Shirley and her husband Vee were in a car accident. Not many details were provided. Then, a couple of months ago, we learned that Vee had died. We were filled with sadness to hear of Vee's death but it wasn't until we received Shirley's Christmas letter that we heard the rest of the story. Shirley writes: ***"Our lives changed drastically in July, when we had a devastating accident. I went to sleep while driving home from Garden City.....we broadsided a semi-truck....the truck driver successfully avoided a head-on collision."*** Vee and Shirley were airlifted to Swedish hospital in Denver and after a period of recovery Vee was transferred to the Tribune Hospital and Shirley to a long-term care home in Goodland, Kansas. Unfortunately, Vee became seriously ill with an infection and was flown to another hospital in Topeka where he died on October 26th.

That drive from Garden City home to Tribune became an unwanted journey for the Dixons. God did not prevent the accident and there has certainly been much darkness for the Dixon family over the last seven months. But Jesus said, ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."*** When we read the whole verse we are reminded that we

**"will have the light of life"** even in the midst of the darkness. God doesn't promise to lift us out of the darkness but gives us the light of life through the darkness.

We come this night to rejoice in the light that, **".....shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."** (John 1:5) The darkness of that dreadful car accident and the darkness of Vee's death did not extinguish the light for Shirley and her family. Shirley's Christmas letter did not dwell on the darkness but on the light that is sustaining her through this unwanted portion of her life journey.

Shirley began her Christmas letter by quoting tonight's Old Testament passage of Light... **"For unto us a child is born...."** In her Christmas letter, Shirley describes rejoicing in the Light through a special funeral celebration for Vee, visits from family and friends near and far away, the joy of grandchildren visiting with song and school work to share, births of great grandchildren, a special family wedding that took place shortly before the accident that both she and Vee were able to attend, and countless other remembrances of rejoicing in the light even while experiencing much darkness.

Shirley concludes her letter by making it clear she continues to rejoice in the light by writing, **"I've tried to convey to you that I'm thankful for my many blessings in spite of my huge loss in Vee's death. It was hard to write this annual letter with his death over-shadowing all else but when I re-read this letter, it is clear that I have so much for which to be thankful. I am so grateful for the many cards, calls, flowers, and visits from my family and friends-the highlights of my day. I am also thankful for this Season and for the Christ Child whose birth we celebrate. Blessings to you all! Shirley"**

Now that is rejoicing in the Light. Whatever darkness you may be facing please know this, the Light of Jesus Christ shines brighter than your darkness. On this Christmas Eve and throughout each day, may we all rejoice in the Light of our Savior and Lord, even Jesus Christ!

Amen