

THE BIRTH OF THE LIGHT

“Familiarity breeds contempt.”

Repetition has a way of draining the excitement out of things that were once exciting.

Someone who passes Niagara Falls on the way to work each day soon stops noticing that it’s even there.

Sunshine in December is precious to us in northeast Ohio, but people in Phoenix take it for granted.

The same principle applies to worship on the Sabbath: what you do every week gets to be old hat after awhile.

I suspect that the reason some people come to church only on Christmas Eve and Easter is that they would rather be entertained twice a year than bored 52 times.

At least that’s the most positive construction I can place on their motives.

Still, as many times as we hear the Christmas story, it has the power to move us.

Luke's simple account of Mary and Joseph and the Christ child born in a manger touches us at some level no matter how many times we hear it.

The reason is that it's the most important news we will ever hear.

The events that took place a few miles outside of Jerusalem a little over two thousand years ago altered the course of human history.

More to the point, it changed everything for you and me.

The great *Old Testament* prophet Isaiah described the events that would take place in Bethlehem over seven hundred years before they took place.

He wrote, "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*"

Now when Isaiah referred to "*The people walking in darkness and living in the land of the shadow of death,*" he was not only describing the people of his own time, he was describing people who live all over the earth today.

Most of the people in the world today may rise with the sun every morning but they walk in spiritual

darkness all day long as they make their way through this valley of the shadow of death.

They walk by the light of the sun but they cannot see the light of Christ.

Mankind has done well in many ways using God's gift of the light of reason to make his life in this world better.

Reason has given us science and science has brought many benefits to mankind.

It has given us safer, more comfortable, healthier and longer lives.

But reason and science have not improved man's moral and spiritual condition.

Reason has not eliminated war and famine and oppression which continue to plague humanity.

Quite the reverse, science has radically increased men's ability to oppress and maim and kill each other.

In the 20th Century alone, mankind was ravaged by more war, torture, rapine and genocide than in all previous history.

And that, my friends, is not light—it is darkness—a darkness that afflicts people all over the world every day.

And this darkness, this pall that covers the nations, doesn't come from "out there"; it comes from within us—a spiritual darkness that enshrouds the souls of mankind.

The Bible calls this darkness *sin*.

Greed, lust, anger, envy, gluttony, sloth and pride—all the deadly sins that infect the human soul—these are the nuclear core of the all the personal and social pathologies that hold us in thrall: anxiety, depression, crime, corruption, terrorism.

And they are all the handiwork of our common enemy, Satan, who continually sows seeds of sinfulness in us and waters those seeds with unbelief.

The seeds sprout and bloom and release the poisonous vapors of war and rapine and genocide and tyranny that bathe the world in misery.

So it is an inner darkness that generates the evils that plague mankind and this inner darkness begins in the human heart.

As Jesus said, "*...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man*

unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony slander. These are what make a man unclean....”

Unless the human heart be enlightened, it remains a black hole in our nature.

But if the light of Christ shines into that heart it disperses the darkness and the heart becomes a source of light.

It was that light that burst forth in Bethlehem almost two thousand years ago, a light that brought “...the dawn of redeeming grace.”

It was the light of a Savior—the Sun of Righteousness—who came to illumine this dark world with the light of God’s love and mercy and peace.

The darkness of an unbeliever’s heart cannot stand against the bright light of God’s grace.

Like the bugs beneath a rock, the dark motives of the human heart go scurrying away when the rock is lifted and they are exposed to the light of truth.

This is what Jesus meant when he said that those who continue in His Word will know the truth and the truth will set them free.

Freedom, truth, light and grace—these are the riches that Christ can impart to the human heart.

To some they come suddenly and dramatically while to others they come gradually.

But whenever they come they enlighten the heart and mind and enable those who were blind to see.

It's never been said better than in the words of the Christmas Carol: *“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given; So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven; No ear may hear His coming, yet in this world of sin; Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.”*

I wish you all a blessed Christmas!

Amen.