

Luke 2:1-20

Matthew 2:1-12

The Sights of Christmas

When I was a child, my little community in Northern Alberta was a place of lights at Christmas time. It seemed to me that nearly every house in the town had some sort of light display. As I recall it, every Christmas Eve after church Mom and Dad would take a longer route back home as we drove up and down the streets of town to see the Christmas light displays. It was something I always looked forward to.

Though through the years not as many homes seemed to be decorated like it may have once been. However, you can still find websites and Facebook pages to help find the best decorated homes in the area. We also have the Parade of Lights in Thunder Bay as well as the Christmas Train which comes all lit up as it makes a stop here. We are drawn to light.

In biblical times light was scarce. While now we have street lights to guide us and light our paths, there was no electricity at that time. In fact, light bulbs are a pretty new invention when looking through the lens of time. It was not until 1879 that Thomas Edison filed his patent for an electric lamp with a carbon filament. That was only 144 years ago. Of course, there were lamps of different kinds that helped people light up the darkness, but nothing compares to what we now know and take for granted each day.

But when one thinks about the sight of angels lighting up a night sky or a star bright enough to capture the attention of those who are attentive to these things in a time when street lights didn't obscure or already light up the darkness, then one can begin to understand why the angels and the star were images that have significance. Though there is much more to it than that. So, let's step back a little to the beginning and look at the many scenes and images that play through the Christmas story.

To begin, there was the sight of the travelers. The trek Mary and Joseph made was about 68 miles, so about 109km. There they are, a young woman and a man making their way to Bethlehem. Mary, full term in her pregnancy. I can't begin to imagine how difficult a journey that would have been for her and then Joseph trying to care for her needs. On top of all this, both knowing that the child Mary carried had a special significance for God and the world. The weight of not only the child, but the emotional weight of the responsibility that have been given to them would both have felt heavy.

Once they finally got to Bethlehem, they were looking for a place to stay, but with so many other travelers already having arrived in the town, it seems that there simply was

no place for them. Yet, someone takes pity on them and says, here, stay in the stable. At least it is some protection from the elements.

After the long journey, even a stable must have been a welcome sight. Even more welcome may have been the sight of animals as it meant the body heat from the large and older animals would have provided some warmth, along with hay that would keep Mary and Joseph from laying directly on the ground, creating some insulation as well.

Then the event happens, Mary goes into labour. The sight of this must have been frightening and exhilarating all at the same time. A young woman in labour, protected and surrounded by animals. Think of the reaction of the animals. They may have sensed that something was going on. Would they be stirring or quiet, somehow sensing that calm was needed? And of course, birthing itself is not a picture-perfect image. It certainly is not the image of calm that we seem to only relate to Christmas story. There is a bodily messiness that comes with giving birth to a child.

Then a small manger, the place for feeding the animals, becomes a place for the baby to sleep. This truly may have been when that scene of calm and reassurance became a reality. Mother and child are safe, resting, healthy. In a time when birthing didn't have the sterility and safe guards that we have with our medical care, to come through that process was itself a feat.

Then somewhere outside of town, shepherds, the lowest on the rank of importance in society, are out bedding down sheep, making sure that the animals in their care are also safe from harm. Well, they get the fright of their lives! Out in that darkness, likely with only a fire to keep them warm, the sky is filled with a choir of angels. The sight was more than they could take in. How would any one of us react to such a thing? Fear, wondering if one was out of their mind? But they heard what they heard and they saw what they saw.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

The angels...we imagine them in their bright yet terrifying light. Angels that brought news of a cosmic shift in how God was going to operate in the world, coming to those least likely to expect to hear such things and yet just the people to do so. Once the shepherds get past all the fear and amazement, they decide to check it out. They don't analyze it, they experience it. They see angels, and then go to see if what they have been told has any kernel of truth.

Upon their arrival, they found the family, they see all of it, the place of the birth, the mother, the father, the child. The news has been confirmed and they celebrate. They are filled with joy. For the shepherds, seeing was believing.

Then they told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed. The shepherds became the first witnesses to God come in the flesh to live as a human being. Throughout Jesus' ministry it was the poor, sick, lonely, and hurting that had his ear. He had time for them. Jesus came for everyone, but for those who suffered and are suffering, Jesus is present in a particular way. God came to earth and so knows our struggles, lived the human struggle, understands what it means to feel physical, emotional, and mental pain.

The story of sightings continues to be the story of Jesus birth as the Magi, wise men, scholars, however you want to name them, see a star so bright that it piques their interest. So much so that they travel, following it to a far-off place. They, like the shepherds are unlikely witnesses to the birth of a Messiah, born to a Jewish couple. They were outsiders, yet God in this story shows us that all are included in this saving event. It was not for a chosen few, it was for the world.

The men bring gifts. Gold symbolized that they were in the presence of one who was a king. An odd thing given the circumstances. The gift of incense symbolized Jesus' presence as God, and the myrrh symbolized the future suffering that would come upon Jesus. Somehow these men understood something that others could not, just as Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds understood the significance of what was taking place that dark night.

As we go out into the night of this evening, may we too pay attention to the light that is Christ that comes into a dark world. One cannot help but think that today in those very places that Jesus spent time, there is a great darkness, there is crying out in terror and fear. So much uncertainty, so much pain and loss. The lights do not shine brightly in Bethlehem today, nor in the Gaza strip. As much as we are able to go from here to places of warmth and safety, that was not the story of Christmas then and it is not the story for millions around the world this night.

The Christmas story is a scene of uncertainty and of hope. It is a story of light and life. Everything about this Christmas story revolves around the baby Jesus. Jesus brought light and life into the world. It was bundled up in the story of a infant and since the death of Jesus we have been trusted with God's message of hope, peace, joy, and love. We are the ones called to live in the world each day, with the light of Christ within us, healing from our own wounds, being transformed into people who bring healing and wholeness to others through our words and our actions. And we do this in the power and light of the Holy Spirit working within us.

God did not give up on the world, but sent his only Son that we might know the great love God has for us. Let us not give up on the world or each other. May the strings of Christmas lights outside homes, and on Christmas trees be reminders of the light within you and others that is Christ. May the sight of tree toppers that are angels and stars remind you of the journey of faith each of us has the opportunity to take, just as the shepherds and magi did so long ago.

This story of the birth of Christ, continues to be celebrated because it is a story of lives transformed, of a world that needs to be saved from itself and God's provision. May the sights of Christmas then and now remind us of God's deep love and concern for you and me and for the world. Amen.