

“LISTEN YOU SHEPHERDS!”  
Isaiah 9:2-7, Hebrews 6:13-20, Luke 2:8-20  
December 11 & 12, 2021

Have you ever been out in the darkness of the night long enough to be able to see pretty well in the dark? Our eyes are designed to work so that we can see in the dark. Let me give you a little ocular biology today.

When we are in darkness, the irises of our eyes opens up to enlarge the pupil, allowing the most light as possible to enter the eye and help us see what is around us. **Since there’s not much light in the night, the eye opens up as much as it can to get the most light that is possible.** And when we remain in that dark condition for a while, our eyes get accustomed to that darkness so that we can go about doing what is necessary. However, when light is abundant, as in the daylight, the iris closes the pupil of the eye, only allowing a small portion of the retina to receive the light that is pouring into the eye.

However the eye is much more complicated, in that the retina of the eye, that part that receives the light and images onto it at the back of the eye, has two different kinds of cells; rods and cones. The rod cells bring about the ability to see in the darkness, because they are more light sensitive than the cone cells. The cone cells are focused primarily around the point in the eye that is directly behind the pupil of the eye (fovea) where they function to give color and depth to our vision. They are less light sensitive, but they distinguish color, and therefore gives us distinction of distance and spacial acuity.

So when darkness surrounds us, the iris opens up the pupil of the eye to allow for the maximum amount of exposure to the retina, allowing the rod cells to receive the light that is available and allows for images to be perceived. There is little color reception in the rods, so we only see in black and white during the night. But when light becomes more readily available, the iris closes the pupil of the eye, thereby limiting the amount of light coming into the eye and focusing the light onto the cone cells that allow for color and distance to be seen. **The eye works in marvelous ways to enable us to see both in the darkness and in the light**, enabling us to move around and do the work we need to do in almost all situations.

But think of this; having become accustomed to the dark, have you ever had a bright light shown at you, either car lights or spot lights from a yard light? **The brightness of the light brings sudden blindness to a person who is acclimated to the darkness** and the light stuns that person for a moment. We usually squint and quickly raise our hands to our faces to protect our eyes from the brightness of the light. We try to see what is going on, but the light is so bright that it's just not possible to see clearly for a bit, until we become adjusted to the light.

That's because the iris of the eye is completely open at night. So when a bright light shines upon you, there is too much light entering the eye and all of the rod cells receive too much stimulation and are overwhelmed by that light. So it takes our eyes a moment to adjust to the sudden change in light condition, and the iris quickly closing the pupil of the eye, to restrict the amount of light that enters.

Now, we don't usually like sudden changes in light conditions surrounding us, so to keep from being "blinded by the light" we recoil away from that sudden light exposure and try to protect our eyes until they can adjust to the new levels of light around us. It might be understood as being afraid of the light, but usually it is just trying to recover from the light blindness. And there might be some anger involved in the one who brings the sudden light change, too.

But finding ourselves no longer in darkness can bring great relief and great joy to us as we are able to see clearly the things around us. We can always work and live and have our being better in the light of day than we can in the darkness of night. We can really live when we have the light around us. Yet there are appropriate times for light and darkness. It's a lot easier to sleep in the dark than to try to sleep in the light.

So imagine what might have happened when "*the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,*" as we heard in Isaiah 9:2. "*They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining on them.*" Did they turn away from the light, fearful of the suddenness of that light? Did they become fearful of what the light might have exposed? That would seem to be a natural reaction, but we're told otherwise. "*You have given them great joy, Lord; you have made them happy. They rejoice in what you*

*have done, as people rejoice when they harvest grain or when they divide captured wealth” (Is. 9:3).*

Instead of running away from the light of the Lord, the people rejoiced in that light.

You see, the darkness that the people were experiencing was a spiritual darkness, the separation from the Lord God because of their sinfulness. **The people were following the ways of the world, and they had given up on following the Lord God’s ways.** So the light of the Lord had been kept from them, and they were living in a spiritual darkness that invaded not only the body, but also the soul. That darkness prevented them from being able to experience the Lord’s presence, and that made them *“discouraged and hungry. In their hunger and their anger they will curse their king and their God. They may look up to the sky or stare at the ground, but they will see nothing but trouble and darkness, terrifying darkness into which they are being driven”* (Isaiah 8:21-22 tells us).

**Whenever we depart from the ways of the Lord and follow the ways of the world, a great darkness envelops us, and as much as we’d like to be able to see clearly, the eyes of our souls become dark and we are unable to see the ways of the Lord.** So we find ourselves surrounded by terrible darkness where heinous acts of violence are done. And because of the blindness of the people suffered within the darkness, *“there will be no way for them to escape from this time of trouble”* (Isaiah 9:1). While we continue to live in the darkness around us, we have no hope, no life, and no future for us.

But our hope is not in the ways of the world, but rather in the ways of God, IF we have the eyes to see them. **If we return to the Lord, and seek His presence, and strive to follow His ways, He provides His light, and it fills us with great joy that makes us happy.** For the ways of the Lord are always for our good, and He delights in leading us out of the darkness of terror into the fullness of the light of joy. And no matter what those in leadership positions are doing, we can find the light of the Lord as we turn from the things of this world and return to the things of God.

And the joy of the Lord comes from what He does on our behalf to bring us into safety once more. Isaiah describes what the Lord God does to bring joy to our hearts. Is. 9:4-5 tells us, *“For You have broken the yoke that burdened them and the rod that beat their shoulders. You have defeated the*

*nation that oppressed and exploited Your people, just as You defeated the army of Midian long ago. The boots of the invading army and all their bloodstained clothing will be destroyed by fire.”*

Let me ask, did you notice the joy in the faces of the refugees from Afghanistan, having been rescued out of the torment and treacherous treatment of the Taliban? They were a people living in great darkness, but the Lord rescued them out of the hands of their oppressors into the safety and freedom of the United States and other countries around the world. Though they came here with very little in their possession, they have great joy at being delivered from the darkness of their nation. The light of a new life has enveloped them so that they can see clearly the opportunities for their future.

**When the Lord delivers us from great oppression and hardship, great joy comes to us that enlivens our souls and brings light to our lives.** When the darkness no longer surrounds us, we are able to see clearly, in vibrant color, and at great distances. The Light of the Lord brings us so many more opportunities for life, as we are able to see clearly all that is around us.

And when it is the Lord bringing us His light, we find that *“there are these two things, then, that cannot change and about which God cannot lie...we who have found safety with Him are greatly encouraged to hold firmly to the hope placed before us. We have this hope as an anchor for our lives. It is safe and sure...”* (Hebrews 6:18-19). **When it is the Lord who bring us His light, we have nothing to fear any longer**, for He is able to provide for us in great and abundant ways when we follow Him. The darkness and dangers of this world are no longer able to cover us with fear, and we are filled with great joy in knowing that God walks with us and guides us away from the path that leads to death, but rather the way that leads us to life.

And that’s the situation we find in our Gospel lesson today. Listen to how the light of the Lord brings great joy and hope to the ones who experienced it. This is Luke 2:8-20. (READ Luke 2:8-20)

The shepherds had no flashlights, no generators for floodlights, and nothing to illuminate their nighttime, outside of the stars and the moon and a campfire. In order to keep watch over their flocks at night, they had to be able to see in the darkness, so their eyes were fully dilated to get as much of the

night light into their eyes. Only then were they able to see if a predator was trying to creep up to snatch one of their lambs away from the flock. These men and women were very attuned to activities of the night. It was their job, after all, to take care of the animals in their care. So they needed to see well.

But on one particular night, something very unusual happened. The sky lit up as if the sun had burned a hole through the earth and shone directly upon the shepherds. It frightened them because they had never seen such a bright light before in the middle of the night. So their reaction was just like what ours would be, squinting, throwing up our hands in front of our faces, and even turning away from the brightness of the light. **And only as the angel begins to speak to them, and their eyes become acclimated to the light, do they begin to relax enough to hear what was being said.** *“I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David’s town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:10-11)!

The shepherds could easily think, “What!? The long awaited and promised Savior was born in Bethlehem? Today? That is TREMENDOUS news! Finally, the Savior is here!”

But there was more, *“And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”* (2:12). What a strange way for the Savior to be presented to the world – a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Why wouldn’t the child be laid in a palace or fancy estate somewhere? Why simply wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a feeding trough for animals? Wait, are you sure? And why are you telling us and not all the people in town? Why not proclaim it to the royalty and the rich and famous? Why tell shepherds?

**In the darkness of their night, these shepherds received the greatest news in all the world - The Savior Had Come!** He had come for all people to see, not just the wealthy or the powerful or the “important” people, but for everyone, even the lowest of the low, shepherds. The wealthy and the powerful and the “important” people would never listen to such a message, because they would immediately become threatened by the Savior’s presence. They would not understand the importance of His birth. They would quickly look for ways to either exploit His presence, or to eliminate Him. But

they probably would not even listen to the news. Their world was flooded with light, but having turned away from the Lord, they would have been living in great darkness. Whereas the shepherds were surrounded by great darkness, but had the eyes to see the light of the Lord.

And had the Savior Child been born to the wealthy or the powerful or the “important,” there would have only been limited access to him. The simple, the lowly and the insignificant people of the country, would not be allowed to see Him. No, the Savior came into the world of the meek and lowly so that all would have access to Him.

But if the one angel’s presence was not enough to startle the shepherds, “*Suddenly a great army of heaven’s angels appeared with the [first] angel, singing praises to God: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom He is pleased’*” (2:13-14)! Not a star would have shown at that moment, nor the moon, for the blazing glory of the Lord would have illuminated the sky as if it were noon time on a cloudless day. If the mouths of the shepherds weren’t open in amazement at the first angel, they certainly would have been at that moment. The choirs of heaven giving glory to God for what He has done! The words Magnificent, Marvelous, Stupendous, Wonderful, would not even begin to describe the situation.

But they sang of an even greater event – “*A child is born to us! A Son is given to us! And He will be our ruler. He will be called, ‘Wonderful Counselor,’ ‘Mighty God,’ ‘Eternal Father,’ ‘Prince of Peace.’ His royal power will continue to grow; His kingdom will always be at peace. He will rule as King David’s successor, basing His power on right and justice, from now until the end of time. The Lord Almighty is determined to do all this*” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

God had fulfilled His promise of a Savior to all the people of the world, but only if they had eyes to see this great thing that the Lord had done. As the angels returned to Heaven, the shepherds were left with the glow of heaven within their hearts, and their souls brightened in great joy at all the angels had told them about. Their eyes opened up their minds and hearts to hear the message, which led to the enlightening of the spirit within them to believe all that they had been told. And the Light of the Lord

took them into Bethlehem “*to see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us*” (Luke 2:15).

And they were able to see the Savior of the world in the stable, humbly lying in a manger for His bed.

The Savior, Christ the Lord, right there in Bethlehem, for all people to see Him, for all people to believe in Him, for all people to find Salvation through Him! **What an awesome God we have to bring His own Son into the world for all to see Him** so that their hearts and minds and spirits could become free from the darkness of the world! How marvelous of our God to provide a Savior who would release us from all of the oppression we face! How wonderful of our God to shine the Light of His love on us who are forlorn and sorrow-worn! How magnificent for God to grant us His Light so that we all can see clearly the ways that He has for us that bring us to life! What an amazing God we have, who would show Himself to the meek, the lowly, the common ordinary people of the world who can then put their hope and trust in Him!

But sadly, the real joy of the birth of Christ has been overwhelmed by the darkness of our world today. The birth of Jesus has been replaced with Frosty the Snowman, and Rudolph the red-nosed Reindeer, and Santa Claus! The light of the birth of Christ has been overtaken with commercialism - the rush to purchase gifts for one another, the hosting of parties, and the lighting up of pine trees. The glory of the Prince of Peace has been replaced by oppressive mandates, fear mongering of the media, and the threats of war on many borders of countries around the world. The announcement of the Savior of the world being born to us is concealed by greed, smash and grab looting, parade massacres, and school shootings. The presence of the Lord with us, Immanuel, is overpowered by Hallmark and Disney and Discovery and ESPN. The glad tidings of great joy are replaced by government handouts, raucous music, and demands for reparations for actions made long ago. The world is surrounded by great darkness, and our eyes have grown accustomed to the dark and sinful ways of the world. We are living in the bleakness of the night, stumbling all over ourselves while trying to discern what is true and good.

But we have the angel’s message to each one of us. “Listen you shepherds of today! Don’t be afraid! There is great news for all people that will bring you great joy if you will hear it. Your Savior

was born in Bethlehem, Christ the Lord! He has come to set all people free so that they no longer need to wander in the darkness of this world, but can find their way into the Light of the Lord. The way of the Lord brings life to all who will receive Him, to all who will follow His teachings, and to all who will trust in His love. The Savior has paid the price for your sins. He has broken the bonds of slavery to sin and death. He has come to give sight to the blind, free the oppressed, bind up the broken hearted, and give strength to the weak and lame. The Savior has come to take us out of the darkness of our hearts and minds to put a new song of joy within us so that we might experience great happiness. He has come to bring us into the presence of the Lord God Almighty so that we have nothing to fear.”

But as the common people of our world, even as the lowly folk with little importance, **let us not just hear these great words, but believe in them, and then go quickly to search out the Savior**, for in Him we will find peace, in Him we will find rest, and in Him we will find comfort and love.

Jesus Christ our Savior is our “Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” He has established His kingdom for all who will trust in Him, so that they no longer live in the darkness of the world, but find the Light of the Lord within them. Let go of the things of this world and put your hope in Jesus! **Seek Jesus and you will find the joy that only He can bring.** Do not be consumed by the darkness of this world, but trust in the light of the Lord that brings us to life. Let’s pray.

Father, there is so much in this world that blinds us from the Light of Jesus. There is so much sorrow, fear and anxiety in us because we focus on this world rather than longing for You. Give us the courage today to seek Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength so that Your light shines upon us. Help us to hear the message, “Do not fear!” Help us to listen to Your word and obey Your commands so that we might find real life no matter where we are or what we might find ourselves in. Thanks You for Jesus, for His willingness to come to be with us so that we could be with Him. May we also sing to You, “Glory to God in the highest” as we seek to live in Your peace here on earth so that you might be pleased with us. This we pray in Jesus’ holy and precious Name. AMEN