“Awakened by a Bright Light”
Luke 2:1-20

By Rev. Dan Clark, Interim Associate Minister

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Christmas Eve Service, 7:30 p.m.

From the Pulpit
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A reading from the Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 2, verses 8-20.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ 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!’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When
they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

The best stories get told over and over and over. Cable TV proves that to us every year with a 24 hour marathon of A Christmas Story. What are your favorites? Do you prefer classics like It’s A Wonderful Life, Miracle on 34th Street, or White Christmas? Or do you love the new movies like Elf or Frozen? Or are you a connoisseur of more serious cinema, like…National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation? We watch them every year, don’t we? Because the best stories need to be told over and over and over again. And we tell the story of this night every year too. It’s a story that takes place on a dark and cold night, maybe a night like this one.

Here we are in late December and the days are getting colder and colder. We can see our breath when we go outside. We’ll soon have to bundle up to play in the snow—
forecasters are calling for snow on New Year’s Day, actually. We’ll have to start our cars and let them warm up before we go anywhere. We’ll have to buy a bag of salt and dig out the snow shovel from behind the brooms and rakes. The days are getting colder.

And the nights are long too. Just days ago we marked the winter solstice, the least sunlight all year long, the sun hugging close to the horizon.

These are cold days and long nights.

A couple years ago, I was leading a team of volunteers from Kiev to Donetsk visiting orphanages. One night we planned to stay at a small camp in a little village. We had to park on the main country highway, and then walk a mile or so through a birch tree forest to the village. As we approached, our host said, “There is a *malinka problema.*” There is a *small problem.* There was no electricity in the camp. That’s fine. We can rough it. Well, we found this out as we were walking there with about 30 minutes of daylight left. But that’s fine. We can hurry up. And we did. Then a few steps later, our host decided to roll out the next bit of information… the hostel where we were staying was heated not by wood-burning stoves like the rest of the village, but
by forced air electric heat. Could we make it through a night in rural Ukraine in late October with no lights and no heat? The days were cold and the nights were long. Though the village had no electricity, I did have my… iPhone! And the Weather Channel app. We found out that it would get down to 44 degrees that night. According to this same Weather Channel app that continues to serve me so well, that’s the temperature it will be when you walk to your cars after this service. So, could we make it? Through the long and cold night? We gathered all the candles we could find, and used our cell phones for flashlights. We stayed warm by staying together, playing games in the kitchen with candles everywhere.

Shepherds were watching their sheep at night – a long night, a cold night. And they had the same malinka problema I had in Ukraine – no electricity in their village. They stayed warm the same way we did – by gathering together – gathering around a fire. A fire to give them light and warmth during the long cold nights.

But then… all of the sudden… without warning… the surprise to beat all surprises…
An angel in their camp, and how bright the messenger was! Bright with the glory of a loving God! And they were afraid. That is putting it lightly. This was a being like they had never seen before. This wasn’t just a little prank. This wasn’t just a little jolt, a little surprise. This was bone-chilling, steal-your-breath-away fear for the rough-and-ready sheep herders.

One thing’s for sure… this startling and fearful bright light woke them up. Woke them up from the cold and dark. Warmed them up with the glory of God.

With the chorus of angels came a change of course. No more shivering through the cold days. No more sleepwalking through the dark nights. With the news – the good news – of glory and peace – we too are awakened by a bright light. Awakened to the words and ways of a still-speaking and all-loving God. And this light will keep us awake.

When my 8 year old son, Jude, was just a baby, he did not like to sleep when the sun was up. It was very difficult, then, to live in Colorado where we enjoyed 300 days of sunshine a year. (Interestingly enough, I think the inverse is true here in Columbus. Anyway…) I remember distinctly one bright
summer evening putting him to bed while the sun still blazed outside. He was about 2 years old and he didn’t understand why he had to go to bed if the sun wasn’t going to bed yet. But then he offered a solution…“Turn it out daddy,” he said. Turn out the sun?!? I will admit that his opinion of me has diminished in the years since he made that request. Now he knows what you and I know. You can’t turn out the sun. It wakes us up and warms us up on it’s own agenda. We can no more turn out the sun, than we can turn off the love of God, a God who’s been lighting up the world since the beginning. In Creation, God threw a ball of fire into the sky to light up the universe. And now, at Christmas, this same universe-lighting God comes close to us with a small and simple candle bringing light to a dark stable.

This is the message of Christmas: Jesus is born in history and in us to wake up a cold world under the cover of a dark night to the bright glory and beautiful grace of God! Jesus is here to wake us up to the love of God! No more sleepwalking. No more shivering. It’s time to be awakened by a bright light!

Amen.

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