

# The Light Shines

*A sermon on John 1:1-14 & Isaiah 9:2-7, preached by Nathan Nettleton, 24 December 2024*

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## Message

In the nativity we see the light of living grace, in all its vulnerability, shining into the darkness of the world's violence and divisiveness.

## Sermon

The people who walked in darkness  
    have seen a great light;  
those who lived in the land of deep darkness —  
    on them light has shined.  
The true light, which enlightens everyone,  
    was coming into the world.  
He came to what was his own,  
    and his own people did not accept him.  
But the light shines in the darkness,  
    and the darkness has not overcome it.

This, dear friends, is the night when we celebrate the coming of the light. Here, in the dark of the night, we feast and sing of the light which breaks open the darkness and illuminates the whole world.

We sing with yearning hope, for we live in dark and fearful times. Nation invades nation, leaving terror and destruction in their wake. Angry mobs attack each other on the streets and give birth to still more bitterness and fear. Ordinary mums and dads run themselves ragged trying ensure that it is not them and their families who fall through the cracks into redundancy, poverty, homelessness and despair.

The dark dark world is constantly divided into winners and losers, and the losers are sacrificed for the security and glorification of the winners. And anyone who shines a challenging light onto the dark violence of it all is denounced as a threat and a loser and is destroyed. “Better that one should be sacrificed than that the whole established order be put at risk,” or so they say.

Dark and fearful times. Dark and fearful times.

But the people who walked in darkness  
    have seen a great light;  
those who lived in the land of deep darkness —  
    on them light has shined.

Tonight we feast in honour of a fragile baby. We join our voices with the unlikely company of angels and archangels, and sheep herders and middle eastern mystics, and declare this baby to be the light of the world, the true light that enlightens everyone, the light that the darkness cannot overcome. What an extraordinary claim! What an unlikely, and perhaps even incredible, cause for a celebration! How can such a faith be anything but ridiculous?! How can anyone believe that in a baby born in a shed to a frightened and displaced couple we

could be seeing the light that can penetrate the darkness of war and terror and poverty and death?

He came to what was his own,  
and his own people did not accept him.  
But the light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it.

But of course, the darkness does not give in to the coming of the light without a fight. For it is of the nature of the darkness to deal in death; to threaten and strike, to victimise and destroy. The kings of darkness will suffer no rivals. If the light is born in the midst of the darkness, it must be snuffed out. Herod dispatches the death squads. Unleash the terror. Kill the child. Kill as many children as it takes to be sure. “Better that one generation should be sacrificed than that the whole established order be exposed to unwelcome light.” The logic of darkness always deals in death. Dark and fearful times.

And if the light escapes, unextinguished, and threats and force cannot stop the people who long for the light singing songs of freedom, then other means must be employed. Darkness maintains its relentless quest to overcome the light; to douse it in fear and arrogance. If threats and force cannot dim it, then it must be trivialised until it loses its penetrating brightness.

Disguised as a friend of the light, darkness drenches the light in sugary sentimentality. The manure is cleaned out of the shed. The sweat is mopped from Mary’s brow. The angels are rendered as little more than sweet cherubs. The coarse and feared sheep herders are depicted as harmless cuddlers of lambs. The doors shut in the face of a woman in labour are erased from memory. We end up with a cute little story that is no threat to the darkness at all.

When we have sugared it down into a little pageant for children with tea towels on their heads, then the darkness can safely continue about its business of sacrificing the children of the poor and the broken and the refugees, because there is nothing left in the story but a tame niceness. Darkness can safely continue its business of sowing seeds of distrust and division; of turning us against each other and deceiving us into thinking we are doing something good and principled when we seek to rid our communities of those we have come to see as a threat.

“We don’t want those sort of people in this country.” “We can’t break bread with those sort of people unless they repent.” “Those sort of people are undermining the family and cannot be allowed near our children.” Hatred and hostility spirals ever onward. Even those who congratulate themselves on their openness and generous tolerance behave divisively and hatefully towards those they have cast out as bigots. The victimising goes on in every direction. Dark and fearful times. Dark and fearful times.

The true light, which enlightens everyone,  
was coming into the world.  
He came to what was his own,  
and his own people did not accept him.

The story we celebrate this night is not a safe one. From the very beginning there were few who could accept it. Every version of the story attests to this. John says he came to his own

but his own people did not accept him. Luke says that even as he was being born, no room could be found for him and the doors were shut to him. Matthew says the very mention of him threw the king into a murderous fit, and the child and his family had to flee.

And strangely enough, right here in the stories of his birth, we are already hearing echoes of the stories of his death. Even as a newborn we could not find room for him. Even at the first glimmer of the light of the world, the world was saying “There’s no room for you here”, “You’re not one of us”, “We must rid ourselves of you for the sake of order and decency”.

But can you see, my friends, that the reasons for this hostility are also there in both the birth stories and the stories of his eventual lynching and death? For here in these stories we see one who is far more powerful and far more glorious than any splendid earthly ruler, but who is willing to lay that aside in a way that our greedy grasping world would never do.

We see one who is far more pure and righteous than even the most virtuous person, but who does not treat anyone as beneath him or as too scandal-stained to be associated with.

We see one who is the rightful judge of all the earth, who does not even judge us harshly for our endeavours to rid ourselves of him and shield ourselves from his light.

We see one who, though we shut our doors and left him to be born in a filthy cow shed, and though we found it easier to condone his lynching than endure his teaching, now approaches us with the unbearable light of extravagant, no-strings-attached, no-grudges held, forgiveness; perfect grace and truth made flesh.

This light is unbearable, because if we condone it, if we look into this light and acknowledge what we see – that it is possible for love to banish fear, and grace to banish vengefulness, and humility to banish arrogance – then all our petty excuses will fall away and our vanity, hostility and resentment will lie exposed in his light.

If we look into this light and acknowledge that it is possible to command awesome power and yet to choose to become as fragile and vulnerable and powerless as a newborn baby in your dealings with others, then all our posturing will fall away and our defensiveness and greed and aggression will lie exposed in his light.

But we have sat in darkness for so long that every fibre of our being hungers for this light. It both terrifies us and fills us with longing for the light of grace and truth, the light which promises the salvation of the world.

And if we can just steel ourselves to look into this light, to allow the searing heat of this light to scorch away our defences, and to expose ourselves to the terrifying truth of utterly undeserved mercy and acceptance, then we will find ourselves born anew, born of God, as children of God, full of grace and truth.

And if we begin to do that, if we begin to approach the world with the same humility and the same astonishing refusal to meet violence with anything but outrageous mercy and resilient love, then the light will grow brighter and the darkness will retreat a little further, and as the body of Christ we will indeed be hastening the long awaited day when the rod of the oppressor will be broken and the boots of the tramping warriors shall be burned as fuel for

the fire and the child born for us will rule in endless peace, with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. Amen?

Come, Lord Jesus. Be born in us tonight.