

I really enjoy Christmas lights. Now, we are in a new home this year, so I had to figure out exactly how are the strings of lights that we have going to fit on this roof, and how am I going to get them up there without falling off the roof myself? So it took a little bit of work earlier in the month to get that figured out, but they are up and I just think they look great. I love the lights as we come home and we've even got a timer on them that turns them on right at sunset and then turns them off right at sunrise. Maybe just like technology like that, maybe there's someone else out there that enjoys things like that. I think it's great.

But just not in our home too. I love seeing them when I'm out driving at night and some houses, maybe some of yours, are filled to the brim with lights it seems. The inflatables in the yard and things on the very top of the roof and just nearly covered and some, just a simple string of lights that light up the porch and it's just magical. It's something that I just, I love the way that they light up the dark. But the thing is, that Christmas doesn't always feel magical, trying to get everything done, all the gifts wrapped, travel plans made, food cooked, pictures taken, sometimes it can be a bit of a crazy season as well. I wonder, where is the peace that the shepherds talk about?

Then we turn to the news and we don't find much good news either. Looking back over 2018, we see headlines like this. Shootings at a high school, a bar, a grocery store, and synagogue, and more, devastating wildfires in California, powerful men brought down by me too or trying to make a comeback, questions about a murdered journalist and about election interference. It's difficult to make sense of a message of peace and joy on a night like tonight when sometimes, if we look around and our world seems so different.

Closer to home of course, for some in this congregation and community, it's the first Christmas without a loved one. They've died recently or sometime in the past year. This is a different kind of Christmas for families. Family members and friends that are in the hospital or recovering or waiting to hear about the results of tests, an accident, or an illness. It's not the kind of Christmas that these families might have hoped for. How do we find hope in the midst of tragedy, loss, and darkness? How do we find light in the midst of the darkness that seems to fill our lives at times? We come to church to find Jesus who brings light and hope. We listen to the Christmas story, we share in holy communion, we light candles. We are here today to celebrate and remember that God is with us.

So let's go back to that very first Christmas, over 2,000 years ago and hear the story again. The story takes place in the town of Bethlehem, which was located just south of Jerusalem. It's about five and a half miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It's about as far, if you were to drive, from here over to Banjo's Café on Topeka Boulevard. That's the distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Bethlehem literally means house of bread, which was likely in reference to what a main industry was in the time of Jesus, baking. Bethlehem was a small village it didn't even make some of the maps at the time, and yet this is the place where God came to be with us.

Mary and Joseph had come back to Joseph's hometown. They were under orders from the Roman government that there would be a census that was taken, and what this meant for Mary is that she was with the in-laws at this time of year. There's pros and cons to that, I'm sure, as you know today, but this one particularly would not be an ordinary visit.

Mary was a young girl, maybe 12, 13, or 14. Joseph was a woodworker, a carpenter. They didn't build houses out of wood at that time, so he probably built doors, farm implements to use in the field and to

help repair them. Nine months ago, before she and Joseph were married, Mary found out that she was pregnant. This was not good news for either of them. When Joseph heard that Mary was pregnant, he decided to end their engagement quietly. He the grace filled option because otherwise her punishment would have been death.

We hear these words from Matthew chapter one. It tells us what happened next. As Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled. Look a virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us."

Here they are nine months later and they realize this baby is coming today. It's going to be born tonight. These are the people who are there when God comes to be with us. Jesus was born to Mary that night and God's messengers the angels bring the story to the birth of the Jesus first to the shepherds who are working nearby and you remember that the shepherds especially at that time were not really welcome in society. They were in the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. They were not the kind of people you'd invite over to your home, especially not straight from work, especially not to hold a newborn baby.

They were folks that were on the outside in society. Yet this is how the news of the birth of Jesus Christ spread. First to those that were on the outside and only to others later. So, God came to be with us as the baby of an unwed teenage mother. On this night God came to be with us as a crying, wrinkled baby born into the world on a bloody pile of straw. It was in this way and into this world that God sent his son Jesus. God came to be with us to push back the darkness in our lives. To seek those who are lost and to bring light to the darkness of our world. Of course, we know that there's still stories of tragedy and loss and darkness. I want to be clear that these things are never God's plan. God gives us the ability to make choices and never intends for us to choose evil and to give into the darkness that has the potential to overwhelm us. The ability to choose to love God and live in the light comes with the ability to choose to turn away from God and to live in the darkness.

Every day each one of us has the choice to make between light and dark. Following God and turning away from God. Sometimes in big ways and sometimes in very small ways. Yet years ago before Jesus was born, the writer of Isaiah pens these words looking to the future that people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch dark land, light has dawned. We read these words as looking forward to the birth of Christ and they are looking forward to the birth of Christ, but they're also about us aren't they? You ever feel like you're walking in darkness in your life? Every one of us at times walks in darkness or lives in deep darkness in some area or some season in our lives and this is why the story of Christmas is for us.

It's for you and for me. Jesus is born to bring light into the darkness of our lives and in to our world. Emmanuel. God with us. God takes on flesh for us for the darkness that it might be pushed back. Jesus is born bringing light to the world and yet the story doesn't end at Jesus birth. That baby grew up. He called disciples. He healed people, taught them and shared about the kingdom of God. He showed us how to love God and to love our neighbor. The things we're still trying to live in to today. Along the way, he made a lot of people mad. He was finally executed by the state and in the most beautiful and epic

portion of all of scripture. Jesus hangs on the cross and prays, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing."

That still isn't the end of the story. On the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. He's raised to live to give us hope and he lives and reigns forever with God. The church is born by the power of the Holy Spirit to change the world and make disciples of all people of all nations and that story, that incredible overarching God story of the world is the story that begins tonight. The good news of Christmas is that God is with us. God wants to bring light into the darkness and enables to live a light. We look forward to the day when Christ returns and the kingdoms of this earth shall become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever. One day there will be no more sorrow and no more pain and no more suffering for the old will have passed away.

Christ comes to us at Christmas and Christ will come again. But the coming of Christ at Christmas isn't just a promise for some time in the future. God is with us is a reality here and now. We can live with God today as a part of God's kingdom in our every day life. God chose us the way and invites us, invites you, invites me to love God and to love our neighbor. Our lives and our actions can be a part of God's work bringing light into the darkness. No matter what tragedy, loss or darkness is real for you now, remember that the worst thing you could imagine is never the last thing. Darkness never has the final word. God's love and light are stronger than any darkness or evil that we may face. God comes to bring light into darkness. Peace when our lives seem crazy and out of control. Order when things seem in chaos.

This Christmas know that God is with us. Choose good. Share light and find life in Jesus Christ. Will you pray with me? Holy God, we confess that there are times when we live in darkness and we are sorry. We thank you for the birth of Jesus to bring great light to shine in the darkness of our lives. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit and give us the gift of love for you and all people today and always. We offer ourselves to you in Jesus name. Amen.