

# Like Never Before: The Light

Preached by

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United Church of Fayetteville

December 24, 2020

Christmas Eve

## **Psalm of the Day:** Psalm 96

<sup>1</sup>O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

<sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

<sup>4</sup>For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

<sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

<sup>6</sup>Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

<sup>7</sup>Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

<sup>8</sup>Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.

<sup>9</sup>Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.

<sup>10</sup>Say among the nations, "The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity."

<sup>11</sup>Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

<sup>12</sup>let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

<sup>13</sup>before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

## **Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

## **Gospel Reading:** John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. <sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens

everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

### **Message: Like Never Before: The Light**

Once upon a time, there was a family living through a pandemic, pretty much like any other family and, of course, unique in their own way. They had traveled through Advent together like never before. In the days closest to Christmas and now on Christmas, there were still new things for Jess, Brian, Lexi, and Shawn to experience. Let's hear from them one more time.

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Brian pondered the way the week unfolded. There were some traditions they could continue despite the pandemic. This last week tended to be more quiet and gentle than the other ones, even pre-pandemic and it seemed to organize itself around light or lights.

They made their annual wide-ranging tour of neighborhoods, viewing all the Christmas light displays. They tended not to go to commercial ones; rather, they enjoyed how people decorated their homes. Everyone had their favorites and their least favorites. Engineer that he was, he preferred the homes neatly outlined in straight lines of lights in one or just a few colors. Jess loved the effect of dripping icicle lights and the lighted deer. Lexi liked the ones with colored spotlights or falling snowflakes in lights against the houses; or Santa in a sleigh and reindeer flying across a roof. Shawn preferred the excitement (chaos?) of many different colors of lights especially if they flashed. They considered different lawn displays –nativities or other scenes. If truth be told, none of them were really fans of the giant inflatable cartoon characters. Especially when they blew in a winter wind, they were a little spooky. They oohed and aahed and laughed. They always gave a National Grid Award for the display they thought most likely to spin the metal wheel loose from the electric meter.

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But for Brian, the highlight of the week was the Christmas Star. Whenever rare celestial events occurred, he packed the whole family in the car and drove beyond the electric lights so they could see lights in the sky. He just thought that when something like that occurred, whether it was once in a generation or a century, you should make the effort to view it.

The Christmas star was particularly remarkable—it wasn't a star, of course. Saturn and Jupiter hadn't aligned on the horizon in this close proximity in nearly 800 years. And long before that, they had come together in 7 BC –most likely the great star the shepherds had seen and the wisemen had followed. Looking at the sky at such times put being human in perspective. It gave one a sense of the vast expanse of the universe, as well as how little humans understood or controlled. No wonder the ancients had seen it as a portent of great things and good news.

In his own way, Brian did too. There was something compelling that he couldn't explain, not just about the Star's rarity, but the fact that it made its appearance on the longest night of the year. On the longest night of this year, of all years. In many ways, 2020 had been one long dark night, not just for him, but for most of the world. The Star reminded him that no matter how dark, no matter how long the night, there was light and hope far beyond human understanding. There was power and, yes, love far bigger than humans could imagine or offer on their own; One who was always working divine purposes into reality.

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There were two more traditions on this night of nights. On Christmas Eve, there were luminaries placed through the whole neighborhood. They had always come home from the church service and driven slowly through the neighborhood with the headlights off, rolling silently up and down the streets appreciating the warm flickering light. Of course, tonight they would be streaming worship, so, instead, they bundled up and walked through the neighborhood—the hush even more profound than he remembered.

They had decided that they would stream the service late, so that it would be Christmas when the service ended. Still hushed by the beauty and wonder of their walk under clear starlight skies, the earth glowing under the silver disk of a near full moon, they unbundled without talking. By previous agreement, Jess made hot chocolate. Brian carried the Advent wreath from the dining room table to the living room with the Christmas tree. Shawn plugged in the lights on the tree. Lexi lit all the candles—first the Christ candle and then all the candles on the wreath and then candles all around the room and turned out the lights.

As they waited for the service to start, each thinking their own thoughts, all of them were thinking that this year was a year without so many important and joyful things—family visits, concerts, parties, worship in church and pageants. In a strange way, it had helped them reset the meter on what was important. They thought that while they wouldn't want to do it again and hoped they never had to, it was still a year when new life and joy had come to them, when they had gotten to know one another and what they believed better. And, of course, for Lexi, in addition to all that, was the sure and certain belief that you could not have too many candles for Christmas.

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And so it was that Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn worshipped the new born king, singing "Silent Night" in the spreading candlelight with the Christmas star on the horizon, and living forever after knowing what was true: "The light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."