

“THE LIGHT HAS COME”

Part 2

John 1:1-18

Back in the day, before we moved over to Gold Beach, I directed a Bible Camp each summer at Howard Prairie Lake – about twenty miles or so outside of Ashland. The camp, at the time, was pretty rustic and the only electricity we had was in the kitchen and dining hall. Other than that, the camp at night was totally dark – no lights in the cabins or along the paths – nothing. After the campers went back to their cabins I and a few other staff members would patrol the darkness – making sure no one sneaking around or doing what they weren’t supposed to be doing. As the Bible says, evil men do their deeds in darkness, so that what they’re doing won’t be exposed.

It became a competition of sorts between the staff to see who came to camp with the biggest, brightest, most powerful flashlight – the kind of meg-watt light source that would light up the darkness and scare campers back to their cabins. It was great fun to catch campers red-handed, and shine the light of truth on them. They’d be sneaking along and suddenly a great light shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. It was lots of fun.

In leading up to Christmas, we’ve been looking at the first 18 verses of chapter one, where the Apostle John describes how Jesus – being fully God – came to earth fully human as the light of the world – to invade the darkness of the world and show us the way to God. Today, in verses 6-13 of John 1, we’re going to look at two responses to Jesus’ entrance into the world, and 2000 years later Jesus still provokes one of two reactions. To some, the light of Jesus is an unwelcome intrusion – they prefer darkness because they don’t want their deeds exposed and change the way they’re living. But to others, the light is glorious and liberating – it exposes their sin and need for Christ and reveals a new, better way to live – a life of joy and hope and meaning.

Before Jesus began His public ministry and revealed Himself as the light, God sent a forerunner, a messenger to get the hearts of people ready for the light. In verses 6-8 we read... “There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.”

We first read about John the Baptist in the gospel of Luke where it says his father Zechariah served as a priest in the temple. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were unable to have children – Elizabeth was past child-bearing years – but one day while doing his priestly duties an angel appears to Zechariah and tells him that his wife will miraculously conceive a son and they are to name him John. The angel tells him that their son will be used of God to turn the hearts of the people back to God and prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

We also find out that John’s mother, Elizabeth, is a relative of Mary’s – most likely a cousin – and they’re both pregnant at the same time. When Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who was five months along, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. Even before Jesus was born, John recognized the uniqueness of Jesus.

John was not the light, but his job was to announce the coming of the light and call people to repentance – to turn from their sin and turn to the coming Messiah. John was absolutely fearless – he was a change agent – a fork-in-the-road kind of guy that called people decide what they would do with Jesus. You either embrace Jesus or reject Him – you either enter into the kingdom of light or remain in the kingdom of darkness.

In verses 9-11 the Apostle John describes the first response to Jesus, and that response was **rejection**... “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

2000 Christmas's later, it's hard for us to imagine how people in the first century could not have recognized Jesus. The God of the universe came to the very world He created, and the world did not recognize its own creator. What's more, Jesus came to His own people – the Jewish people who knew all the signs to look for – and they did not receive Him. How could that happen? How could they miss Him?

There are probably as many reasons people reject Christ as there are people, but in the Christmas story we find three groups of people who each, for various reasons, rejected the light. The first group were the **innkeepers** in Bethlehem. In the Christmas story we traditionally talk about one innkeeper – the stingy scrouge who turned Mary and Joseph away. But Luke 2 only mentions that there was no room in the “inn.” It is likely that there were several inns in Bethlehem that were full that night by people just like Joseph and Mary who were forced to travel to their hometowns to take part in a Roman census taken every fourteen years.

Joseph was a descendent of King David, which meant that he had to return to the city of Bethlehem, about 70 miles south of their home in Nazareth. By the time he and Mary arrived, the city no doubt was overflowing with weary travelers looking for a place to stay.

You'd think that some innkeeper along the way would find room for a pregnant mother, but each place turned them away. The best place Joseph could find for Mary to give birth with some measure of privacy was in a stable – which was likely a cave in the side of a hill that was used to keep livestock. Luke 2:7 says that Mary “gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

It's sad to read the words, “No room.” I think of the verse in Hebrews 13:2 that talks about showing hospitality to strangers because you just might be showing hospitality to angels without knowing it. On this night, the Son of God came to their door and turned Him away. It's easy to vilify these innkeepers as cold-hearted and cruel, but the Bible doesn't say that that they were. They were simply preoccupied and busy – people were coming into town right and left, business was booming, and they were so caught up in the hustle and bustle that they didn't recognize that God was right in their midst.

It reminds me of a story I read about Bill Cowher, the former coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who was known for intense focus on all things football. Coach Cowher was sitting at a luncheon and the lady next to him told him how much she supported the Steelers and told him what a good job he was doing. He thanked her and asked her what her name was. She looked surprised, but told him her name was Sophie Masloff, the mayor of Pittsburgh. In the same way, the innkeepers were too preoccupied with running their business to notice that the Messiah was right in front of them.

In the Parable of the Sower Jesus talks about the thorny soil that represents those who hear the good news of Jesus, but the cares and worries of the present world choke the seed from penetrating their hearts. Their time and attention are so captured by the daily, temporal things of life that they don't even think about God and where they will spend eternity.

Jesus would encounter many, many would-be followers like this – people who were not antagonistic towards Him – but who were too distracted by the things of this earth – making money, pursuing pleasure and comfort – to make room for Jesus.

I think of the verse in Revelation 3:20 where the Lord says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” Just as Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the inn, the Lord knocks on the door or your heart – to come in and make His home in you. God will not force His way into your heart – He won’t kick the door down – but He gently knocks and wise is the person who lets Him in. Don’t let lesser things – no matter how good they may be – keep you from a relationship with Jesus. Make room for Him, let Him in, and give Him your life.

While the innkeepers had *no room* for Jesus because of preoccupation, the **religious leaders** of Israel saw *no need* for Jesus because of pride. Of all the people in the Christmas story, the religious priests and teachers should not have missed the birth of Christ. They knew the Old Testament scriptures forwards and backwards – they knew from Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem – they knew that He would be born in the family line of David – and they knew that He would be born of a virgin. They had been waiting centuries for the Messiah to come, but when He finally arrived, just seven miles down the road from Jerusalem, they didn’t bother to leave their homes to welcome Him.

They were expecting a more powerful, robust Messiah – not someone born in a manger, but in a palace – someone who would engineer a rebellion against Rome and return Israel to her former glory. They were not expecting a Messiah who would confront them with their sin and call for them to repent. “Repent? What do we need to repent of – we’re the good, moral people – liars and adulterers and thieves need to repent, but we’re the righteous ones.”

There are many, many people today, like the religious leaders, who have no awareness that they need a Savior. “I’m not perfect,” they say, “But I’m sincere, I try my best to live right, I treat people well, I obey the law and pay my taxes.” When they hear words like repentance or turning from sin, they bristle. “I don’t need to change, I’m fine the way I am.”

Jesus got under the religious leader’s skin because He exposed that while outwardly clean and moral, inwardly they were full of pride and envy and greed – they needed Jesus just as much as the thieves and adulterers. In order to be saved and enter the kingdom of light, a person must own up to the fact that they’re sinners and need a Savior.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The only person who makes it to heaven is the one who recognizes that he or she is spiritual destitute before God, that there’s nothing they can do, nothing they can say, nothing they can give to God that would allow them into His kingdom. The only way you can make it to heaven is to acknowledge your sin and trust Christ alone to save you.

While the innkeepers had no room for Jesus because they were preoccupied, and the religious leaders saw no need for Jesus because of pride, we see a third person in the Christmas story – **King Herod** – who had *no submission* to Jesus because He did not want to relinquish his power. King Herod is the villain of the Christmas story – a power-hungry, egotistical tyrant who saw the baby in the manger as a rival to his throne.

When the wise men rode into Jerusalem and asked, “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?” Herod was caught off guard... “I’m the only king around here, who is this so-called king you’re looking for?” When he found out that his rival was born in Bethlehem, he gave orders to kill all boys in the vicinity who were two years old or younger, but by that time Mary and Joseph had already escaped to Egypt.

Herod represents many today who reject Jesus for the simple reason that they do not want to submit to any other king – they want to be their own king. Some are not hostile towards Christ – they’ll celebrate Christmas and they’ll even pray to Him when they get into trouble – but they do not want to submit their lives to Him – they want to be king over their own lives, and resist anyone or anything that interferes with their power, their plans, or their lifestyle.

Others, who refuse to submit to Christ, are very aggressive in their opposition to Him and work to remove Christ and Christianity from the public square. They’re the ones who burn Christmas trees down, who petition courts to remove public nativity scenes, who try to censure graduation speeches that mention Christ, and file lawsuits to keep athletes from praying together after games. They put a tremendous amount of energy into opposing Christ because they see Him as a threat to their self-rule and agenda.

Jesus said, “In the last days you can expect the level of hostility against me to ramp up– not just against me, but all who follow me – they’re going to go after you because of me.” The hostility we see towards Christ and Christianity today is fueled by the prince of darkness – Satan – who does everything in his power to keep people in darkness. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel.” The only way out of the darkness is the supernatural intervention of God.

I think of the Apostle Paul, who before coming to Christ was an ardent enemy of Christ and Christ-followers, and was on his way to hunt down Christians when a bright light from heaven knocked him to the ground. Paul was immediately humbled and realized the depth of his sin, and devoted the rest of his life serving the one he once had persecuted. His encounter with the light is a powerful example of how the love and grace of God can break through to the hardest of hearts and deliver them from the darkness.

John goes on in verses 12-13 to say that not everyone rejected Christ – there were others who embraced the light and received Christ... “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

While the innkeepers, the religious leaders, and Herod missed the arrival of Jesus, others like the shepherds and the wise men saw the light, responded in faith, and became part of God’s family. The shepherds were out in their field near Bethlehem, watching over their flocks, when an angel appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. The darkness of the night was suddenly flooded by light, and they reacted the way you and I would react – they were terrified.

Luke 2:10-12 says, But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” They said, “Let’s go.” Once they saw the light, their response was immediate. They went to see Jesus, and after they left, they became the first evangelists – spreading the word about what they had seen and heard.

Everything about Jesus' entrance into the world spoke of humility, including the fact that the shepherds were the first to hear the news of Christ's birth. Shepherds were the outcasts of society – they were poor – they didn't have the income of the innkeepers, or the prestige of the religious leaders, or the power of Herod – but they had what was most important – they had faith. Nothing stood in the way of them embracing the light.

The wise men also embraced the light. Unlike the shepherds, they were busy, well-respected men with power and influence, but they abandoned everything to seek out the newborn king. They had everything the world had to offer, but there was something missing. As wise men, they knew the answers to the most complex questions, but they couldn't answer the most important questions: Why am I here and where am I going? What's missing in my life?

God's Word says that if you seek the Lord, you will find Him. If a person honestly seeks God, He will give light to show them the way to salvation. The wise men were seeking and looked up and saw a star. They were overjoyed. In faith, they followed the star for over a thousand miles until it led them directly to Jesus. When they saw Jesus, they knew He was the person they had been seeking, and they bowed down in submission. They recognized Him as their king and presented Him with gifts. They followed the light and the light led them to Jesus.

John 1:12 is one of the clearest verses in the Bible on salvation, and tells us how we can be reconciled with God and become part of His spiritual family. Notice two words John uses – *believe* and *receive*. To be saved you must believe that Jesus is the Son of God come to earth in the flesh to die on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. But believing the facts about Jesus is only part of the equation. You must also trust and rely on those facts, and receive Him as your personal Savior from sin.

Some of you may have heard the story of Charles Blondin, who was one of the world's finest tightrope walkers. In 1860 he successfully crossed the treacherous Niagara Falls (approximately a 1,000-foot span, 160 feet above the raging waters) on a tightrope. He then turned to the gathered crowd that was awestruck by this incredible feat and asked how many believed he could traverse the tightrope a second time pushing a wheelbarrow. The enthusiastic crowd cheered, acknowledging their belief in Blondin. Blondin succeeded, and then addressed the astonished crowd again, "Does anyone believe enough in me to get in the wheelbarrow and cross Niagara Falls with me?" No one volunteered! They believed he could do it, but they did not commit themselves and put their faith in him.

Jesus said that there is a great chasm between man and God, and the only way to get from one side to the other is through Him. Becoming a Christian is not just believing that Jesus can save you, but it is getting in the wheelbarrow of faith and entrusting your life to Him. Becoming a Christian means that you understand who Jesus Christ is and what He did for you, to agree with God that you need Him alone as your substitute for your sin, and to invite Him to personally enter your life.

When you receive Jesus, verse 13 says, you become a child of God – you are spiritually reborn. All of us born in sin and apart for God will die in sin. But the moment you believe in Jesus and receive Him as your Savior from sin, you are spiritually born again, and God says, "Welcome to the family." "If anyone is in Christ," says 2 Corinthians 5:17, "he is a new creature." Just as Jesus was incarnated in human flesh, at the moment you receive Jesus He becomes incarnated in your life. You are spiritually reborn.

What a thrilling truth to think that the God of the Universe would leave the glory of heaven and come to earth as a baby in a manger – to bring light to our dark world and show us the way to God. God’s revelation of light demands a response – you can either reject Christ or receive Him. You can either remain in the kingdom of darkness or enter into the kingdom of light. Today can be the turning point of your life, where you say to God, “I believe you sent your Son to earth to die for me and pay the penalty for my sin, and I receive Jesus – I trust Him as my Savior from sin. I want to be your child and walk in your light.”