

“The Light of Christmas: the Wonder of Light”

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Merry Christmas! Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the light of the world.

How many of you have a tree with lights on it at home? How many of you have driven by or gone to see a Christmas light display sometime this season? Looks like pretty much everyone! We're basically surrounded by lights this time of year. I don't know about you, but I love the lights of the Christmas season. Some are classy, some are creative, some (let's face it) are downright tacky, but they all add to the festive nature of Christmas.

Can you imagine this season without lights? It's hard to do. But really, this tradition of hanging lights at Christmas is fairly new, and we can thank Mr. Thomas Edison (as well as many other hard-working scientists) for making it possible with the invention of the electric lightbulb. Well, sure, candles were used in Christmas celebrations even farther back in history, but medieval lords and ladies and peasants had no Walmart where they could grab a string of a hundred candles to hang in the castle. So I think it's safe to say they didn't have as much light as we're used to seeing in the Christmas season.

Imagine you are living in the late 1800s. When darkness falls, your only source of light is from fire—candles, lanterns, or oil lamps. Night was dark, very dark. If you've ever been out camping in the wilderness on a cloudy night, you might have some idea of true darkness. Back then, that was normal. Even cities were pretty dark at night, despite the foul-smelling oil lamps that flickered to bring some illumination.

So you probably would have been surprised and curious when you heard that Thomas Edison was giving the first public demonstration of the first practical incandescent lightbulb at his home and workshop in Menlo Park, New Jersey. If you were a well-to-do New Yorker, you would have boarded a Pennsylvania Railroad train on December 31, 1879, and expectantly ridden the twenty miles to sleepy Menlo Park. Dressed in your New Year's finest, you would have disembarked the train and walked past the dozen or so houses in the tiny town, gazing open-mouthed into the cold night sky. It wasn't the stars you were marveling at, but the glowing artificial lights on lampposts lining the street to Edison's home, which glowed with electrical radiance. It was a completely foreign sight to your Victorian eyes, and one that filled you with amazement.

Edison wasn't the first to invent the incandescent light, but he was the first to develop a safe, affordable, long-lasting bulb that was viable for public use. Of course, word of Edison's miraculous invention spread fast. But Edison wasn't the only player in the electricity game. George Westinghouse and Nikola Tesla were also in the race to decide who would light America, and their AC (alternating current) power could travel much farther than Edison's DC (direct current) power. As their industries competed, many people could only imagine what electrical lighting was really like firsthand.

Then came the 1893 World's Fair. In Chicago on May 1, 1893, President Grover Cleveland pushed a button and illuminated nearly 100,000 incandescent lamps powered by Westinghouse and Tesla, who had won the bid. Lights lit the buildings. Searchlights lit up the sky, and even the fountains were lit with colored lights. Can you imagine what that was like for the 27 million people at the fair who had never seen electric light like this before? Wonder and awe must have filled everyone's senses. And as electricity spread, awestruck Americans experienced a revolution. Light had come into the darkness, and their lives were changed.

Of course, that wasn't the first time light had changed the world. In fact, light changed the world from the very beginning. We are told in Genesis 1:1 that, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And then "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day" (Genesis 1:3–5).

From Creation, the Bible leads us through humanity's progression from the light of God's perfection to the darkness of man's fall into sin and then through generations and centuries of waiting for the dawn of the day when the Messiah would bring the light of restoration. Then that day came—but not like anyone expected. Two thousand years ago, on what we now call the first Christmas, came the incomparable, world-altering arrival of the true light of the world in Bethlehem. It was a truly wondrous night!

We often speak of the wonder of Christmas. We usually think of it as a little child with wide eyes and open mouth, gaping at a mountain of presents underneath a glittering Christmas tree. That is wonder. That child's heart is filled to overflowing with a sense of amazement and awe. "What *is* this? You mean all these gifts are for *me*?" It's an all-consuming sense of overwhelmed emotion. And there's a beauty to the innocence of that childlike reaction.

But wonder can run even deeper as we grow older. As we realize the pain and destruction and injustice of the darkness around us, we can experience more capacity for wonder and awe at the light. Our hearts are ready to be pierced and illuminated in new ways by the dawning of God's light. That's what happened for those who were a part of Jesus's arrival on earth. Let's look at how His birth created different kinds and different levels of wonder in all who encountered the Christ child.

Courageous Mary and Joseph

First we see Mary and Joseph. On that first Christmas Eve, they were young, tired, alone, and probably afraid. Their lives had unexpectedly been turned upside down, and while they had been given miraculous messages, they had nine months to walk through an emotional darkness from being culturally stigmatized.

Angels had told both Mary and Joseph not to be afraid and that this was what God had planned. But can you imagine explaining to someone else that you'd received this message from an angel? "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20–21). Who would believe it?

The couple had to be wondering what in the world God was doing. Yet with the birth of Jesus came a new and deep sense of wonder. If you are a parent, you know the sense of wonder that comes with the arrival of a new life, especially your first baby. That had to be part of what they felt. But then unexpected worshipers from unexpected places began showing up, sent by angels. And that awe and reverence and wonder had to deepen. Luke said, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Despite the crazy circumstances and difficulties to get there, Mary recognized the wonder of this moment, and she treasured it. And as Mary and Joseph let Christ's light shine into their hearts and lives, they surely must have found new courage to trust and step forward, no matter how uncertain the way ahead might seem.

The Surprised Shepherds

Then, of course, there were the shepherds. These guys were definitely in the dark—literally. They were somewhere out in the fields in the wilderness at night watching over sheep. This was nothing new to them. They were used to dark nights. They probably had a small campfire for light or warmth. Moving around in the pitch darkness was normal. A full moon would have made a bright night, and they must have had amazing views of the starry sky.

But nothing would have prepared them for a sky full of angels. Can you imagine their surprise when an angel—I don't know, maybe glowing?—appeared in the sky and began telling them he had good news? And then a whole crowd of angels lit up and began praising God, probably in song? The shepherds were awestruck. The Bible says they were "terrified" (Luke 2:9). They were completely taken by surprise by this absolutely unexpected event.

So the shepherds didn't sit around talking about how crazy their angelic encounter was. They didn't shrug it off because they couldn't understand it. Instead, they immediately got up and went to see for themselves. Luke 2:15 tells us, "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'"

Of course, the shepherds weren't supposed to go anywhere that night. They were supposed to stay in that dark field and watch the sheep—that was their job. They were supposed to be responsible. But after their surprise at the light of the angels and the announcement of the arrival of the Light of the World, they were overwhelmed with wonder. Nothing else mattered. They had to go to see and experience what God was calling them to.

The Trusting Magi

Later there were the wise men, the Magi, who encountered the light of a star and followed it in the night sky. These guys were educated and smart—they studied the skies; they knew the stars. They regularly watched the heavens filled with twinkling lights, studied their significance, and knew that this star was different. The Magi knew what the star meant. Even on a celestial canvas of almost infinite lights, this one filled them with wonder. And they were so amazed that they were drawn into action and compelled to take a long, difficult journey to see and worship Jesus.

What's also important to note is that along the way, the Magi came face-to-face with the darkness of evil. Maybe they thought everyone would be celebrating the momentous arrival of the Messiah. But when they arrived in Jerusalem and inquired about this new king of the Jews, King Herod was not happy. He was threatened by the news of a new ruler, and he wanted to hold onto his power at all costs. When Herod encountered the light of Christ, he tried to squelch it. He did not experience wonder; instead, fear drove him to use lies and deception to try to destroy the Savior of the world. When he asked the wise men to return and tell him where they had found the baby, it wasn't so that he could worship. He intended to get rid of any ruler who threatened his own power. The wise men went to find and worship Jesus, and it took an angelic warning about Herod to send them home by another route—away from Herod.

What About You?

Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi—these three different groups of people had three different experiences of darkness and light. Yet each of them allowed themselves to experience the wonder that comes from an encounter with the light.

What about you? Where do you find yourself this Christmas Eve? Are you in a place of emotional darkness—lonely, isolated, doubting, overwhelmed? Maybe similar to Mary and Joseph, you even feel that trusting God has led to others misunderstanding or excluding you.

If you are lonely or hurting this season, the light of Christmas is for you. The arrival of Jesus is a call to courage and a promise of hope and love. It is God placing His Son among us, with us. With the psalmist, you can say, "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1). And you can trust the promise of Isaiah 42:16, which says, "I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them." If you feel trapped in darkness, the light of Christ is for you.

Or maybe this Christmas Eve you find yourself busy, burned out, or even bitter about the hectic pace of the season. In the midst of the many things you have to do, are you ready to feel wonder? If God surprises you with the light of the birth of His Son, are you ready and willing to follow? Will you leave your work, your social and family responsibilities, and come to the manger to worship? No matter what responsibilities you carry, He is waiting with this promise: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

Or maybe you identify more with the wise men. You've been watching and waiting, studying, and preparing for this season. You've been purposeful, but have you closed your heart to the wonder that originally drew you to Christ? Or have you encountered a new fear, a new threat, or a distraction that has cast a shadow of darkness across your path? Are you willing to choose to continue on your journey to experience the birth of Jesus?

Colossians 3:2 says, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." When we do that, when we seek the light and wonder of Jesus, we can also live by the promise Jesus gave later in His life when He said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). Jesus came, lived a perfect life for imperfect people, died on a cross in our place, and rose again so that we no longer have to live in darkness, but can live abundantly and eternally because the Light of World has overcome the darkness, and has given to us light and life.

So, wherever you find yourself this Christmas Eve, I invite you into the light. I invite you to experience the wonder of the birth of the Savior. The same God who spoke light into existence at Creation has sent His Son as the light of the world. As 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

The darkness of our world and of our own lives doesn't prevent Jesus from coming—in fact, it is the very reason that He came. And it is the very reason we feel wonder when His light arrives amidst the darkness. Jesus was born to save a broken world through His life, death and resurrection for us. He came as the light to guide us into relationship with God, our Creator. Later in Jesus's life, when He was teaching, He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). That is a promise for each of us. Tonight I invite you to experience the wonder of His birth and allow Him to be the light of your life this Christmas Eve and every day.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you" (Isaiah 60:1).

Let's pray together.