

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church
on December 23, 2023, Christmas Eve.**

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

<Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 1:26-2:20>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, who brings us to Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Amen.

Every year on Christmas Eve, growing up, two stories took center stage. After everything else was done - dinner, worship, evening chores - my parents and I, and sometimes a grandparent or two, would gather in the living room next to the Christmas Tree and my dad would first read the well-known classic, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." That was always the first story. Then, following that, he would read the story of Christ's birth and the proclamation of good news found in Luke 2.

In my younger days I was excited for this ritual because it meant this was the last real step before presents; the only thing left was to sleep through the night and awake the next morning to the potential of realizing what lay beneath the tree. In later years, I grew to recognize the stories for what they are, as well as appreciating the quiet evening time spent with family. Still, these two stories represent for many of us the tone and sentiment of Christmas. Even tonight, as we gather, we turn again in faith to Luke's gospel and hear the proclamations of the angels, the response of the shepherds. But for me, in the years that I have been in ministry, a third story has taken a place in my Christmas Eve lexicon.

It is the story of a Greek philosopher and teacher who ended a lecture to his class with the typical query, "Are there any questions?" Legend does not say what the topic was for that day's lecture, or if there was an expectation of any questions. But one student did indeed raise his hand, asking, "What's the meaning of life?" His classmates responded with the usual laughter you might expect when such a question is asked as the final moments of a class tick by. But the professor, looking at the student in earnest, as if to gauge whether he truly wanted to share a secret, finally answered, "I will tell you what is the meaning of life." He took his wallet out of his hip pocket, opened it, and fished around in it for a moment before bringing out what appeared to be a quarter, but not quite. Then, he told *his* story.

"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found several broken pieces of a mirror from a wrecked motorcycle. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece, this one.

"By scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine, in deep holes and crevices. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but an example for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not light or the source of light. But light, truth, understanding, and knowledge are there, and they will only shine in dark places if I reflect them.

"I am fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world, into the black places in the hearts of men, and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."

Leonard Cohen, in his song *Anthem*, sang, "Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

The poet Rumi, similarly, reflected that "the wound is the place where the light enters you."

And we come together this evening, placing ourselves in the midst of candlelight and Christ-light, in a world that has more than its fair share of cracks. A world that is war-torn and ravaged. A world that is hurting and grieving, hungry and thirsty, cold and despondent. It is a world in which Christmas festivities in Bethlehem, the very birthplace of our Lord, have been cancelled amidst the warfare and suffering of innocents. We know these griefs. We know these hurts. We know these hungers, for we experience them ourselves.

And it is this cracked world to which God came fully in Immanuel, God-With-Us, to dwell among us. A world which is fully known to God in Jesus, who has experienced every facet of human living - each sorrow and each joy, each pain and each laugh.

Through the cracks of our pain and hurt, through the cracks and divisions among communities, families, peoples, nations, Christ enters the world, again and again; our lives, our world. The whole world. Tonight, Christ comes now again, into the deepest hurts and needs of the world, bringing good news of great joy. Through the fullness of humanity, God sends the fullness of hope and peace, of joy and love. The fullness of life. Shining light into those precious spaces, where previously it was thought that such light would never shine. Offering warmth, reception, acknowledgment and healing. This is the Christmas miracle. And it will lead, directly along a wandering path, to the point when Christ finally fills-full the miracle by overcoming death and bringing us to the doorstep of Life.

The story of that Greek philosopher has one last piece to it. After sharing the meaning of life, of his life, he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto the student's face, onto his hands and his heart. And then he offered these words: "Where there is darkness, let us bring light; where there is despair, let us bring hope."

The light of Christ has again come into the world, filtering through the cracks in our world, in our lives, bringing good news for all people, all of creation. Let us ring the bells. Let us sing the songs. Let us proclaim with joy. And above all, let us bring light, the light of the Ages which no darkness has ever overcome nor understood. Let us reflect the Light of the World. Amen.