

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Jim Capps**  
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**Celebrating the Light**  
**Luke 2:8-20**

Bob Russell, former pastor of the Southeast Christian Church of Louisville, tells a story of a home in their neighborhood leaving their Christmas lights burning long after Christmas. It wasn't so bad at first, but in the middle of February, Russell was really critical of the family as he passed thinking even if they are not taking the lights down, at least they should turn them off.

Can you imagine his chagrin in the middle of March when he drove by and saw a sign outside the house that explained why that family had left the lights on? The sign simply said, "Welcome home, Jimmy." They had left unashamedly left their lights on to welcome home their son who had been serving in the war in Viet Nam. Can you imagine their celebration demonstrated by the lights?

What are your moments of greatest celebration? Graduation day? Wedding day? Maybe like me, one of those greatest days happened at the birth of a child. For me that day in late April is indelibly etched upon my mind.

Other days of great celebration are centered upon my daughter, Becky's life. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy when I saw her walk into the great cathedral-like chapel at Princeton when she graduated from seminary. Then words can't begin to describe the celebration I felt as she went through the service of ordination here in this place and became a Minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Each year great celebration breaks out all over the world at this time of the year as we remember the serendipitous scene of the Birth of Jesus portrayed for us in Matthew and Luke's Gospels. Our joyous festivities tell of God breaking through human history and coming in human form to live and minister in our midst. We are celebrating the Light of the World coming into our darkness.

Today, let's look together at Luke 2:8-20 and see two groups of people who celebrated the light on that momentous day in Bethlehem.

**The shepherds celebrated the light.**

Do you know much about shepherds? Most people in our world of large cities and super highways know very little about the plight of a shepherd. Having been in Israel several years ago, I can tell you that you still see them out with their flocks much like they must have been in biblical days.

Shepherds were on the lower end of the respectability spectrum. Tending their flocks meant that they weren't able to keep all the ceremonial laws like meticulous hand-washing. That made them despised by the orthodox Jews of their day. They were simple men whose lives were spent with some relatively unintelligent animals. Even though Bethlehem's favorite son and Israel's greatest monarch, King David, was a shepherd, they were looked down upon with disdain by the society crowd.

The sheep for which they were caring were most probably being raised to be sacrificed in the Temple in nearby Jerusalem. Offered daily on the altar and in great numbers during the Passover, these sheep were carefully grown to be unblemished and perfect.

Like every other night, the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth were each taking their watch or prescribed turns while the others warmed themselves by the fire or took a little nap. Their main task was to guard the sheep from wild animals or thieves.

Through the appearance of an angel, God breaks through their quiet, sleepy darkness with a message that would forever change their lives. The sky is instantly lit up with the "glory of the Lord" which "shone around them."

More than startled like you and I might be when getting a phone call in the middle of the night when we are sleeping soundly, the shepherds were terrified. I can't speak for you but I know I would be shaking, my face in the dust, peeking through my fingers at the supernatural happening.

Listen to the way in which Max Lucado describes this wonderful scene in his book, *The Applause of Heaven*:

“An ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a God who loves to hook an ‘extra’ on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed. The sheep would have forgotten, and the shepherds would have slept the night away.

But God dances amidst the common. And that night He did a waltz.

The black sky exploded with brightness. ...Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherd was dead asleep, the next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an alien.

The night was ordinary no more.

The angel came in the night because that is when lights are best seen and that is when they are most needed. God comes into the common for the same reason.”

The angel's message begins with meeting them in their terrified state with the words with which angels usually begin their message, “Do not be afraid.” What follows is a mind numbing, yet stupendous proclamation, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be to all the people.” I believe the “to all the people” includes us here today.

The angel continues with the most mind-boggling, revolutionary news ever delivered on this good planet earth: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” We are talking about none other than the Messiah for whom the people had awaited for centuries believing that He would bring them deliverance from all earthly powers.

The angel continues by telling them that they would find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. This would be a sign to them of the authenticity of the message.

Without warning, the angel is joined by a great company of angels. They praised God together by singing or chanting, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Then as suddenly as they had appeared, like a light switch being turned off, they and the bright light were gone and the night was dark once more. It takes the stunned, shaking shepherds a few seconds before words can come off their lips. Obediently they do just as the angel had instructed them and, of course, find the baby, along with Mary and Joseph just where they were told He would be.

Bruce Thielemann, a great preacher of yesteryear, tells the story of a little boy who was in his first Christmas pageant. He was 5. He was one of the shepherds—you know, they wear their bathrobes and their sandals and carry cardboard crooks—not a lead shepherd, just a common shepherd standing in the back. But when it came time for the Nativity, he crowded around to the front so that he could see. Then, having seen he stepped to the footlights and looking out, cried out to his parents, “Mommy! Daddy! Mary had her baby, and it's a boy!”

Well that's the same kind of unbridled joy and celebration that caused the shepherds to tell everyone they saw about all that happened. Of course, everyone was amazed at the shepherd's words. You can't keep news like that to yourself.

They couldn't stay there in Bethlehem; they had to return to the fields. But you can bet there was no more sleep that night. They celebrated all that they had experienced, “glorifying and praising God for

all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” The shepherds celebrated the light!

### **Mary and Joseph also celebrated the light.**

Try to imagine the sense of celebration Mary and Joseph must have felt. They had been through a lot. Now the baby was safely born with no complications and Mary was doing well. They must have been celebrating those facts which you don't take for granted when a woman gives birth to a baby.

As the shepherds came to praise God and honor their son, their minds must have hurried back to what they had been through over the past 9 months. Joseph must have remembered the dream when an angel of the Lord appeared to him. He was told to take Mary home as his wife instead of quietly divorcing her. He was instructed to name the baby “Jesus” meaning that He would save His people from their sins.

During that very special evening, Mary must have also remembered being encountered by the Angel Gabriel and told that she had found favor with God. She would have a child whom she would name “Jesus.” He would be the son of the Most High and would rule on the throne of David and He would rule over the house of Jacob forever with a kingdom that would have no end.

Mary was incredulous at Gabriel's words since she was a virgin. Gabriel quickly says that the child she would bear would be by the Holy Spirit. Nothing was impossible for God. In humble obedience she responded, “I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

Together Mary and Joseph must have remembered the ridicule they had endured from the misunderstanding people in their town. They were the subject of very cruel slander and gossip for several months. Now all of the pain and tears melted away as they held the newborn Jesus.

Words cannot adequately describe their celebration as the shepherds and wise men come and worship their baby. God had blessed them beyond human comprehension. Their weariness was filled with joyful praise to the God who had brought about the impossible. They were celebrating the light!

### **Application**

Dear friends, do we have any less reason to celebrate the light brought into the world by the birth of Jesus than the shepherds or Mary and Joseph? No, I believe we have even more reason to celebrate today because we can reflect upon what He really did and continues to do by coming to our world.

Listen to how Theodotus of Ancyra, a martyred said in the 4<sup>th</sup> century celebrated the light:

“The Lord of all comes as a slave amidst poverty. The hunter has no wish to startle the prey. Choosing for his birthplace an unknown village in a remote province, he is born of a poor maiden and accepts all that poverty implies, for he hopes by stealth to ensnare and save us.

If he had been born to high rank and amidst luxury, unbelievers would have said the world had been transformed by wealth. If he had chosen as his birthplace the great city of Rome, they would have thought the transformation had been brought about by civil power. Suppose he had been the son of an emperor. They would have said: “How useful it is to be powerful!” Imagine him the son of a senator. It would have been: “Look what can be accomplished by legislation!”

But in fact, what did he do? He chose surroundings that were poor and simple, so ordinary as to be almost unnoticed, so that people would know it was the Godhead alone that had changed the world. This was his reason for choosing his mother from among the poor of a very poor country, and for becoming poor himself.”

This same Jesus comes to us in our world today and wants to transform our lives for the better. He wants to bring us forgiveness for all of our sins. He desires to bring us joy and meaning in the hectic, changing world we live in. In Him we find hope for the future and all of its tomorrows both in this life and in the life to come. Now that is something to celebrate with the greatest of passions.

Jesus has forever changed history and he can change you and me for the better. Listen to these words from Frederick Buechner:

“Whether he was born in 4 B. C. or A. D. 6, in Bethlehem or Nazareth, whether there were multitudes of the heavenly host to hymn the glory of it or just Mary and her husband—when the child was born, the whole course of human history was changed. That is a truth as unassailable as any truth. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions and Western man’s whole understanding of himself and his world—it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did. And there is truth beyond that: for millions of people who have believed since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living it.”

On this Sunday before Christmas, are you celebrating the light? Or, are just going through the motions this year? Maybe you find it hard to celebrate when you don’t have a job; when you are feeling grief; when you are bone tired; when you don’t feel appreciated; when you have been unfairly maligned by people you love; when life just doesn’t seem fair. If these or any other reasons are keeping you from really celebrating the birth of the One who came as the Light of the world, lay it before the manger and ask God to help you celebrate the light of Christmas like you have never celebrated it before.

Maybe your celebration can be based upon a different kind of gift exchange than you could have ever imagined. The kind of gift exchange old sage and preacher, Vance Havner talks about when he says, “Christmas is based on an exchange of gifts, the gift of God to man—His unspeakable gift of His son, and the gift of man to God—when we present our bodies a living sacrifice.”

Will you celebrate the light this Christmas?