

It's dark. This time of year, it's dark as night by five-thirty. It makes you realize one of the great things about summer is the long days. But that's not really what I mean when I say, "It's dark." I think you know what I mean.

If you're not sure, I'll just come right out and say it: you and I live in a time of spiritual darkness. It's everywhere. I don't think I have to spend a whole lot of time building a case for it, do you? Just think back over the headlines from this past year. Example after example of empty, soul-crushing darkness. And that's just the headlines.

This past year, you may have had to deal with darkness in a personal and painful way. Disease. The death of a loved one. The destruction of a relationship. A disaster you didn't see coming. It's dark for you.

Then there's the darkness we invite right into our hearts and minds. The things we know are wrong, but don't care to change. The voices that urge us to do whatever we want to do, no matter how much it hurts somebody else. Yes, it is dark.

Believe it or not, this is a Christmas sermon. Because the message of the Bible is: "Things really are this bad. We cannot heal or save ourselves. Things really are this dark. Nevertheless, there is hope." And tonight, that hope is expressed this way: "On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned." That is what we are doing here this evening; we are remembering that a light has dawned. This is a poetic way of saying that someone has appeared, and that Someone can chase away darkness. This is a prophecy; a prediction and a description of what it would be like when Jesus arrived in the world. "On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned." The dim light of the stable where Jesus was born quickly gives way to a sky full of angels. Jesus' birth is the beginning of an invasion; the beginning of light invading darkness. This Christmas, will you let Jesus invade your darkness? As you remember his birth, will you let Him shine His light into the depths of who you are?

What will happen if you do? Well, let's think of some of the qualities of light. Isaiah the prophet uses the language of the dawning sun. Light from the sun gives life. We can begin there. If the sun went out, you would freeze. No sun, no life on this planet. The Bible says that only in God do we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). You exist only because God is keeping you together. Physical life is a gift from Him. So is spiritual life. Unfortunately, physical and spiritual life have been broken by something called sin, which is the source of all darkness. If you let Jesus shine His light into you, you will learn that He is the source of life, which means that a meaningful and fulfilling life begins with Him. It begins with knowing Him and living in connection with Him.

Also, light shows what is really there. If you drive a car at night down a dark road without your headlights on, you'll probably crash. That's because light reveals the truth of things, how they really are, and you won't have enough truth to steer the car safely. If you let Jesus shine His light into you, you will learn that He is the source of truth, truth that enables you navigate life with confidence and courage and wisdom.

One other thing: Light is beautiful. It is breathtaking. At this time of year, many of us make a point to go look at stunning light displays; people will travel for hours to look at Christmas lights. Light inspires joy. God is the source. An early Christian pastor named Augustine once

wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." If you let Jesus shine His light into you, you will find a beauty in Him. You will find a joy in Him so powerful that you no longer have to chase after other things that you think are going to make you happy.

So, how can you have this light? If you go back to Isaiah's prophecy, you'll have your answer. It says, "For to us a child is born; to us a son is given." The Son, Jesus, is given. He is a gift. He can be yours, on one condition.

Before I tell you what that is, there is a hint in verse five. It speaks of a great battle, but it says, "Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire." Wow. OK, what is that about? It means that the great victory of light over darkness will not require our strength. No warrior's boot, no armor or sword necessary. Melt them down and burn them up, because someone else is going to fight for you. Who is it?

It's that baby in the manger. He will grow up to be your Champion. How's he going to do it? The same prophet, Isaiah, says it like this: "The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." He will take all our darkness to his cross, and it will die with Him there. He will fight for you. He will die instead of you. He will come back to life on a dazzling Sunday morning, and that will redefine what life is. This great work of rescue, this light that flashes on you with new life, truth, and beauty, comes as a gift. The rescue Jesus offers can be yours, on one condition. The only way to receive it is to admit you don't deserve it. The only way I can have it is to realize I can't earn it with good behavior.

Christmas is about receiving presents, but some gifts are a challenge. They make you swallow your pride. Imagine opening a present from a friend—and it's a book about a new diet. And you unwrap the next one and it's another book from another friend, "Overcoming Selfishness." If you say to them, "Thank you so much," you are, in a sense, admitting "I am indeed overweight and obnoxious." Some gifts are hard to receive, because to do so is to admit you have flaws and you need help.

Imagine you had a friend who figured out you were in financial trouble, and came to you and offered a large sum of money to get you out of your predicament. If something like that has ever happened to you, you probably found that to accept the gift meant swallowing your pride.

There has never been a gift that make you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus requires us to do. Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, so in the dark, that the Son of God had to come down here into the cold and do what we could never do. To accept the true Christmas gift, you have to admit you have a problem with sin. You need to give up control of your life. That is going lower than any of us really wants to go. Yet Jesus' greatness is seen in far down he came to love you and me. He brought the light of heaven down to a darkened stable; the newborn King of the Universe all swaddled and lying in the place they fed the animals. He came down to offer a large sum—the sum of his own life—to get you out of the predicament of life in the darkness. He is the light that dawns on this holy night. He is the gift that is yours for the taking.