

***Theme: The Promise of Christmas***

***“Hope - Light in the Darkness”***

***Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – December 2-3, 2017***

**Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-2; John 1:1-5**

**VIDEO Sermon Intro**

**SLIDE “Hope – Light in the Darkness”**

Please take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and Message Notes. You will find the Scriptures listed at the top and the place to take notes if you would like to write down things that you want to remember and reflect upon in the days and weeks ahead. I believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us when we gather for worship, and if you hear something you feel is just for you, I hope you use that space to write it down. If you’re watching at home or online, you can download this resource right off the website. You will find continued there and on the backside, daily Scripture readings that tie back into today’s message, and the themes of light and darkness which we will be looking at together. I think if you read the Bible on your own this week, it will help this season of Advent become more meaningful.

I have always been someone who has enjoyed science fiction. I have followed things like Star Trek and I am very excited that the eighth installment of the Star Wars franchise comes out this month. The first one came out in 1977 and it was the first movie I ever saw in the new dome Century 21 theater that was built in our community. It was a state-of-the-art wraparound screen with Dolby stereo. We waited in line to get tickets and even though I had no idea what the film was about, I was excited because everyone else was excited. This was in the days when we didn’t go to the movies very often and I had not seen a trailer or really even heard about the film, except for my older stepbrother who insisted that we had to go. We got in the theater and

it was totally dark as the lights went out. There were no previews or commercials like today's movie theaters show, and instead, the screen and sound system simply erupted with the beginning soundtrack that would become iconic.

I'm excited that "The Last Jedi," comes out in just a couple of weeks and I find it interesting that the timing of releasing Star Wars films always happens around Christmas time. Part of it is marketing, but it also feels very appropriate to me as a pastor to have these films come out during the season of Advent, which is the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Every one of these Star Wars films is about the epic battle between light and darkness, between good and evil. The evil empire is the dark side and the Jedi Knights are fighting for the light. The Jedi Knights are empowered and encouraged and emboldened by the force which is at work in all of creation, moving them towards doing what is good and right and living in the light.

Those of us who follow Jesus, call that force the Holy Spirit. We believe it is at work within us and there is an epic battle between good and evil; this is what is behind the Christmas story, especially as we think about the world that we live in today. The Christmas story is about light overcoming darkness and good overcoming evil, a force that is at work within us if we will allow it. See if you can't see these images in this trailer for the film, "The Last Jedi."

## **VIDEO                    The Last Jedi Trailer**

There is this epic battle of good and evil, and in every one of these films we find two things happening. Good is battling over evil and in every episode light triumphs over darkness, but there is also a battle going on within each of the heroes or heroines in which they either give into the dark side or they continue to walk in the light. Or, in the case of Darth Vader, they return to the light after being in darkness.

This points us to these great themes of Advent. Do you know why you decorate your Christmas trees with lights and put them in your houses? It's our way of remembering that the light came into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. This is why we share the candlelight at Christmas Eve services, because Christ is the light of the world.

In order for us to truly appreciate the light, we have to understand the

darkness. We find darkness referred to in two different ways in the Scriptures. The first is the idea that darkness is equated with evil, the hurt that human beings inflict upon one another as we go to the dark side inside of ourselves. We see societal evil and hurt that happens and the idea is that the light has come to overcome that evil we experience in the world. The second idea of darkness is about despair, gloom or hopelessness that we sometimes feel in life. We can often feel that around the holidays as well, and we want to look at both of those forms of darkness and how light overcomes them in this first weekend of Advent.

**SLIDE                      Darkness which is evil**

Let's begin with this idea of the darkness which is evil. This is not hard for us to find or see in today's world. We read it every day in whatever newsfeed we pay attention to, and the news outlets know that those stories get our attention. This week we read about a young boy in middle school who shot at a group of other middle schoolers, killing one of them because they had called him names. A young girl was lured into a car by an older man and disappeared. The authorities are still looking for her. We read story after story of people in power abusing their position to take advantage of women and others who are vulnerable. We have seen school shootings and church shootings and we know they will come again.

We see our political and world leaders lobbing personal attacks at each other instead of focusing on issues; working together to solve problems instead of creating new ones. When societies or nations come together and decide to pursue the dark path, horrible things happen. In Africa we have learned about tribal warfare and in the Middle East we hear almost daily about ISIS, who killed hundreds of people in Egypt and now drive vehicles onto sidewalks and into crowds of people. They continually seek to do acts of violence to terrorize others, gaining control of not only land but of people's hearts. When we see these things happening in the world, we recognize that it's not just about future, sci-fi movies depicting the battle between good and evil. This is actually about the history of the human race, as we find it at the very beginning of our Scriptures. The second story in the Bible is the one of Cain killing his brother Abel. In Genesis 6, we find God grieving that humanity was even created because human beings were perpetually violent towards

one another.

We see graphic and grotesque images of evil, but we also can feel it in our own lives. We gossip and say things that hurt others. We act with cruelty and sometimes our fears lead us to indifference to the sufferings of others. Hate begins to build up in our own hearts if we don't guard them, and we find the battle for good and evil is not just out there somewhere, but also somewhere inside of us. There is something inside each of us which is broken, and we can't give into it.

As people of faith, we are called to give into the side that pushes us towards the light. There is a Holy Spirit which beckons us to be better, and we find that spirit at work in the story of ancient Israel. This is their story, and it's important to remember this season of preparing for the birth of Christ because Jesus was Jewish. Much of what we read in the Jewish prophets, which we read during this time of year because we believe it foretells the coming of Jesus, is about what was going on during their time when they were dealing with their own evil empires.

We often read prophecy and think that Isaiah was speaking about Jesus coming 700 years later. While it's true that Jesus fulfilled the words of Isaiah, he was also talking about things happening in his own day when he talks about light and darkness. Isaiah is living in Jerusalem and 740 BC and he is writing to the people in Judea which is the southern kingdom of Israel. He is warning the people about what is going on in their day, and how they must turn to God and trust in God and do what is just and God will protect them. If they turn away from God and forget God's commandments, and follow after the God of the pagans around them, doing unjust things to one another and not caring for the poor and those in need, then God will remove his protection from them and horrible things will happen. This did not take someone with clairvoyance to see what was happening, because at this time an empire was forming in what is modern day Iraq and Syria. It was on the move and heading towards Israel.

Isaiah, and the other prophets from that time, knew that if God didn't protect them then they had no hope. They could not stand up against the Empire of the Assyrians. The Assyrian Empire existed for 1900 years, even

though most of us never heard of them. They were around longer than the Romans or the Greeks. Sometimes they were doing good and sometimes they were doing evil and sometimes they were strong and sometimes they were weak. In the days of Isaiah, the Assyrian Empire had a resurgence in the Middle East and it was being led by an Emperor named Tiglath-Pileser III.

**GRAPHIC**            **Tiglath-Pileser III**

**GRAPHIC**            **Tiglath-Pileser III attacking**

Here's an image of him. He seized the Assyrian throne during a civil war and killed the royal family. He made sweeping changes to the Assyrian government, considerably improving its efficiency and security. Tiglath-Pileser III discouraged revolts against Assyrian rule with the use of forced deportations of thousands of people all over the empire. He is one of the most successful military commanders in world history, conquering most of the world known to the Assyrians before his death. Let me give you an idea of where all this is happening.

**GRAPHIC**            **Deportation of Jews by Assyrians**

You can see the Assyrian Empire controlled this entire region in the yellow, from Egypt all the way up through what is modern day Israel into Syria and Iraq and Iran. You see Jerusalem down here below and the Jewish people. Once they were conquered by the Assyrian Emperor, they were taken into exile along this dotted route all the way through Nineveh, which was the capital city of the Empire. This entire region is called the Fertile Crescent and whoever controlled it, controlled not only trade routes but also much of the agriculture which fed this entire region and three separate continents.

**GRAPHIC**    **Kingdoms of Israel and Judah map 720 BC**

We are going to zoom in on this map to the nation of Israel. In 720 BC, Israel was split into two parts with the North being called Israel and the South being called Judah. This entire northern kingdom was taken into exile on that route I just showed you. They were forced to intermarry with villagers and people in those regions and they lost their identity and their religion. These became the 10 lost tribes of Israel, scattered by the Assyrians throughout this region of the Fertile Crescent. This is the backdrop for Isaiah and his words

that we just read. You can read about it in 2 Kings 15:29, where we read these words.

**BIBLE**      ***29 During Pekah's reign, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria attacked Israel again, and he captured the towns of Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, and Hazor. He also conquered the regions of Gilead, Galilee, and all of Naphtali, and he took the people to Assyria as captives.***

Isaiah is now speaking from Jerusalem, in the southern nation of Judah, about these events. We see that clearly in Isaiah, chapter 9. We read these words.

**BIBLE**      ***1 Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. 2 The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.***

Isaiah goes on to talk about the very real images of evil.

**BIBLE**      ***5 The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned. They will be fuel for the fire. 6 For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***

Scholars read these words from Isaiah and they believe that Isaiah is referring to the crown prince Hezekiah, who would be a reformer and would lead the Jewish people who were left in the southern kingdom to a resurgence of Israel. Isaiah may have had that in mind, and probably was speaking about the events of his day, but after Isaiah's death and the Assyrian Empire was wiped off the face of the earth by the Babylonians, the Babylonians came and destroyed what was left of Israel in the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. When that happened, the children of Israel went back to the words of Isaiah the prophet and said, "Look at these words from Isaiah. Those who were living in darkness will see a great light. A child will be

born to us, a son will be given. There must still be hope for us.”

They believe these words of Isaiah brought hope for their generation as well, and that God would raise up a deliverer. In fact, that did happen, and the Jews were allowed to go back to their homeland. But 200 years later, the Greeks conquered this region and the Jewish people went back to Isaiah, and they read these words and found hope for their generation. Though they were living in darkness, a great light would come. Later on, the Egyptians would conquer this region, then the Syrians and finally the Romans. Just before the birth of Jesus, the Romans are the occupying force and the people were looking once more to Isaiah, reading these words and saying, “Yes, may this king come for us once more!”

This is how prophecy works in the Bible. It would have a fulfillment during the time of the prophet who was writing about the events of his day, but could also be seen throughout history as being fulfilled. Matthew, in his gospel, was writing 40 years after the death of Jesus, and as he looked back he also remembered the words of Isaiah because Jesus had gone back to the area around Galilee, which had been that northern kingdom of Israel. Jesus intentionally chose to go back there to minister to the people and Matthew said, “Of course, Jesus was the one. He was the child who was born to us who brought light into the darkness.”

How did Jesus bring light into Galilee? He showed compassion to people who were sick. He cast out demons from those who were oppressed. He offered forgiveness and mercy and grace for those who were considered sinners and outcasts and not worthy. He opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf and the tongues of those who couldn’t speak. He even raised the dead, and in doing those things he was literally living out these words of Isaiah, “There is always hope. A light will come in the darkness. There is grace and mercy that comes in the form of God’s light for each one of us.”

Jesus embodied that light and lived it out—this light that the Scriptures talk about going throughout all human history. What’s interesting, is that every single one of those empires fell in human history. Darkness and evil empires may seem to prevail for a while, but they ultimately all fall away. I find it interesting that these empires of the Syrians and the Babylonians and

the Romans who rose for a while and then fell, is in the same region in which we find ISIS. We recognize that when empires like this are trying to arise, that requires a physical battle sometimes. But we also remember that, in the end, even though darkness might seem to prevail for a season of 10 or 20 or 50 years, that darkness never ultimately prevails. All those evil empires throughout history were ultimately defeated, which is precisely what the Scriptures promise.

On candlelight Christmas Eve services, we remember this idea that darkness might seem like it's all around us, but Christ came to penetrate that darkness with the light. We tell that story through song on Christmas Eve as we sing Christmas hymns. We tell the story by reading the Scriptures and by sharing the message, and finally, at the end of the service we tell the story dramatically with something more than words. We extinguish all the candles and turn off all the lights in this room. One lone candle is left shining, which represents the Christ child, a baby who was born in Bethlehem. When the room is dark, you can feel the anxiety in the room when you are up front. Kids sometimes start to cry, people shuffle their feet and are anxious and wonder when we are going to turn the lights back on. We then read the Christmas story from the Gospel of John.

**BIBLE**      ***1 In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He existed in the beginning with God. 3 God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. 4 The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.***

God's light, pushing back the darkness, becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ. This is what we remember and believe at Christmas time, that God came and walked among us to show us this light. We take the Christ candle on Christmas Eve in the middle of the dark room and we stand in the aisles and we pass that light to each one of you. As we take that light, it's our way of saying, "Yes, I want this light living inside of me. I want to bear this light to the world and moved by the force, the power of the Holy Spirit. I want to help push back the darkness." We passed that light to the people around us,



and by the time we get to the last verse of Silent Night, the entire room is filled with light and we hold up our candles. We recognize that this was the strategy of Jesus for changing the world. It was one person, one light, which came to show us what true love really looks like, and what it means to be truly human and live into God's dream for us. We carry that light into the world.

We recognize that when we carry that light it brings us joy, so we go right from that moment into, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let Earth receive her King." This is our story, and this is what Christmas is all about, light defeating the darkness.

In that moment, we are also meant to recognize the darkness that is in each one of us. If we are honest, there is a battle between the light and the darkness that we can feel inside of ourselves. There are times that we say hurtful things or do hurtful things that we can't take back. We act with indifference or fear, instead of love, kindness and caring compassion. We forget what Christmas is about and we get caught up in shopping and buying and we find ourselves consumed by the darkness of debt if we are not careful. This is not new to each one of us. This is the way the early Christians experienced it and John writes about it to the church, probably at Ephesus, when he penned these words in his first letter, chapter 2.

**BIBLE**     *7 Dear friends, I am not writing a new commandment for you; rather it is an old one you have had from the very beginning. This old commandment—to love one another—is the same message you heard before. 8 Yet it is also new. Jesus lived the truth of this commandment, and you also are living it. For the darkness is disappearing, and the true light is already shining. 9 If anyone claims, "I am living in the light," but hates a fellow believer, that person is still living in darkness.*

Even Christians in the first century had this tendency to say they were walking in the light, yet still treat each other horribly or with contempt. Here is the question John wrote to the early Christians, and a question we are meant to grapple with today. Am I walking in the light? Or am I walking in the darkness? We wrestle with this daily, if we are honest.

We see this in the Star Wars films that we began the sermon with. In the most recent film, we get a clear sense that the new heroine, Rey, is wrestling with the darkness and light inside of her. One of my favorite pictures of this is found in the original trilogy, “The Return of the Jedi.” We get to the end of that film, and Luke Skywalker, the child who was born or the son who was given in this story, was supposed to set the world right. He was fighting for what was good and had the force with him. Luke then learns that his arch nemesis, Darth Vader, is his father, who was once a great Jedi Knight, Anakin Skywalker. Anakin turned to the dark side and they are fighting in the climactic scene when Luke gains the upper hand and is able to destroy Darth Vader. Suddenly, Luke becomes aware that his own hate is what will turn him to the dark side.

### **VIDEO      Return of the Jedi – Luke confronts the Emperor**

This picture represents the struggle within us. There comes a point where, inside of us, we need to be able to say, “I cannot turn to the dark side. I am going to walk in the light. I’m going to live in the light. I’m going to carry the light. I will not give in to hate or indifference or fear.” There are many ways the dark side seeks to gain control in our lives, and our task is to push against that darkness and invite the Holy Spirit to give us the strength to stay in the light.

### **SLIDE              Darkness as despair and hopelessness**

There is another way that the Scriptures talk about darkness, and that is when we become so overwhelmed by despair or hopelessness, we can’t see our way forward. I was talking recently with a family that was struggling with the loss of their child. They were in such darkness and they couldn’t imagine that the darkness would ever end. As someone who has been through that experience, I can tell you that it does feel like the darkness will never end, but this is the Scriptures promise. We are promised that the darkness will not overcome the light and that we might walk through seasons of darkness, but even in those dark moments, God is with us.

I think of those words from Psalm 23, ***“Even though I walk to the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, because thou art with me.”*** In Hebrew, it doesn’t say, “shadow of death.” The actual wording is, “the darkest

valley.” Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we don’t need to fear the darkness or evil, because God is with us. Notice that we are not told we will never walk through the darkest valley. Just because we have faith in Christ, doesn’t mean we won’t walk through dark valleys. What we are promised that we don’t have to fear evil. Why? It is because God is with us, with his rod and staff bringing comfort.

Jesus coming to embody God’s light, God’s character and God’s love was God’s way of saying to each of us, “I am with you.” Jesus even said out loud at the end of his life, “I will be with you always, even until the end of the age.” We can trust that, but the hard part is we don’t see it always. Sometimes, if we were honest, we just don’t feel it. It’s in those moments that we are encouraged to hold on, even if it’s by our fingertips, because the darkness will not ultimately prevail.

Sometimes, it takes other people to help us get through the darkness. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. He said this about his son in Luke’s gospel.

**BIBLE**      ***76 “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. 77 You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. 78 Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”***

John the Baptist would help this light to spread into our world. The birth of Jesus, his life, his teachings, his miracles, his compassion, his death and resurrection are all pointing us towards this epic story of the battle between good and evil. When we get to the end, Jesus is hanging on the cross and it appears as though evil has the final word, yet on the third day, Christians say, he rose from the grave. We believe that death was not final, but instead he was resurrected to say that hate, sin and death will never have the final word.

No matter how dark our circumstances, God walks with us. Jesus is alive the world and he will bring light to our darkness. Sometimes, that happens to other people and they sustain and carry us. When we have lost a loved one

too young or tragically, the one thing that can carry us is the truth that we will see that loved one again and they are safe in the arms of the God of light. We know that our loved ones are alive and well with God and one day we will see them face-to-face. What sustains us in those moments is God, which is often our family, our friends, and the people in our church who come alongside and carry us. When we can't see or feel the light, there are those who will come and carry us through those dark moments and we all need that.

We have a prayer team that lifts up prayers for you when you are going through tough stuff and you let us know. We have prayer quilts that we make and take to people going through cancer surgery, the death of a loved one or some other trauma. On Thanksgiving day, I had several people in our congregation I was lifting up specifically. I heard from one of them and they shared nothing but gratitude, even in the midst of hospital stay that was not planned over the week of Thanksgiving. This person told me that no matter how much time they have left, they belong to Jesus. They win by staying alive longer to be with family and friends and they win if it's time to go be in the presence of the Lord of light.

I don't know how people make it through those moments without their faith, that God ultimately prevails, that light defeats darkness and that cancer and death and sickness will not have the final word. I also don't know how people make it through without a church family or community that helps carry them and sustain them. There are times where you will have friends or family who can only see the darkness, and you will be the one who brings light into their darkness. You will offer hope and companionship.

I think about the number of times people have given me a check or some money to give to someone else in the congregation going through hard times, not because it's about the money but to let them know they are being prayed for and lifted up. They long for God to say through them, "I haven't forgotten you. I'm going to help you through this." I have seen some of you step up and reach out to neighbors that you didn't even know before who are going through a hard time. In that way you become a light in the darkness. In 1 John 2:10 we read these words.

**BIBLE**      ***10 Anyone who loves a fellow believer is living in the light***

To be filled with the light means that we are practicing love towards others. Remember that in John 8:12 Jesus says these words.

**BIBLE**      ***12 Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."***

When we follow Jesus, when we accept him, when we trust in him, we find hope in him, we allow his light to come into our lives and push back the darkness. Every day we can reaffirm that commitment and say, "Once more today Lord, help me to walk in the light. Help me to love you, and to follow you, and to serve you, and to be used by you, and to take your light into the world." This is what we are invited to pray on a daily basis as followers of Jesus.

When we light a candle on Christmas Eve, we are reminded that Jesus is the light of the world, but we also must remember something Jesus said in Matthew's gospel, chapter 5, verse 14.

**BIBLE**      ***You are the light of the world!***

So, which is it? Is Jesus the light of the world or are you the light of the world? Of course, the answer is both, which is why we say we want to Be Jesus Christ to the World. Jesus is alive in the world and came to illuminate the darkness, then he called his disciples to himself and by his Holy Spirit, his light shines in and through us. He then sends us out on his mission, to illuminate the world. You are the light of the world; the Greek word that is used is plural. You, together with all the people around you, are the light of the world. You and I as the church, are called to take the light of Christ out into the world, to embody and incarnate that light. When we get together, we have an impact we simply cannot have by ourselves.

I noticed in my own life that I have a lot of good intentions, but my good intentions turn into actions when, at the end of the service, I stop and grab something off the Christmas Angel tree. Each week we gather for worship, we call you to action. Many of you did operation Christmas child shoeboxes. This year we sent more than 6000 of them out from our garage as we collected

them from throughout the region. Every single week the bulletins filled with opportunities to go and be light to the world. Many of you did that on Thanksgiving Day down at the community Thanksgiving dinner at the fairgrounds. Some of you prepared and some of you served and some of you cleaned up and some of you took meals to those who were homebound. This only happens when people care enough to be the light of Christ in the world by offering mashed potatoes and gravy and stuffing and turkey and green beans, and of course pie.

Jesus went on in Matthew's gospel and said.

**BIBLE**      ***"A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. Let your light so shine before others so they might see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."***

We have talked about this before, but the strategy that God has for pushing back the darkness is you, all of us together, doing those good works that give glory to God. It's not that WE are saved by our good works. It's that the world is in many ways saved and changed by those who are the light of the world loving their neighbors.

I end by reminding you that every year Christmas Eve we give away anything you designate as Christmas Eve offering. Last year it was over \$100,000 that we gave away. Some of it stays here locally and some of it goes to international projects that we are a part of. You can volunteer in most of these projects and see where your money goes. Every year, during this season of Advent, I challenge those of you who consider this your church home, to consider giving a gift in the Christmas Eve offering equal to what you're going to spend on your own family at Christmas.

The first year we did this, I remember hearing a gasp as people were thinking out loud, "Are you kidding me? This is the year I planned a trip to Disney World for my whole family! Who would actually do that?" Since we have been doing this, I am pretty sure that we have a number of church families who give multiple times what they spend on their own Christmas to the Christmas Eve offering. Either that, or they spend a whole lot of money on their own Christmas, more than I can imagine spending. Many families do give as much as they spend on Christmas. Many people used the Christmas

cards that we make and provide for you and told family and friends that you normally give a gift to, that you are doing something in their name to the Christmas Eve offering here, helping those who were truly in need.

This is how we remember what Christmas Eve is really all about. Every year I tell you this truth in a bit of a crass way that I learned from a friend of mine who was a pastor.

**SLIDE                      Christmas is not your birthday!**

Now, every year I have someone that tells me it actually is their birthday and if it is, I apologize. But for most of us, it's not our birthday. It's not our kids' birthday. It's Jesus' birthday. How would Jesus have us celebrate his birthday? Should we just go out and spend as much as we can on ourselves at Christmas to keep our economy humming? Or do we do something else at Christmas?

Every year I have at least one family tell me that there is no way they could give as much away as they spend on their own family Christmas, so they have decided this year to spend less money on themselves. They all tell me the same thing, that this has been the best Christmas ever because they are not focused on themselves and what everyone needs to get. They don't get anxious about getting just the right gift, but instead focus on giving to what is truly important.

I had one family last year, after Christmas, tell me they had a conversation with a neighbor who doesn't go to church about how they are now doing Christmas because of our Christmas Eve offering. Their neighbor decided they wanted to do that too and asked if they could give to our Christmas Eve offering even though they don't go to our church. I told them we couldn't accept their offering... Of course, I didn't say that! But let me just remind you that when people see your good works and how you are doing Christmas differently, and how much more you are enjoying yourselves, you share the light with them and they want to be a part of it. This is how it works.

We have atheists and agnostics who get dragged Christmas Eve worship with their families and tell me every year after the service, "My favorite part of your service was the offering." How's that for crazy? They love that we give

away that offering to those who are really in need. Over these few weeks before we get to Christmas, I will be sharing with you where that offering will be going and how it is you will be a light in different places throughout the world.

Our international project this year is Pastocalle, Ecuador which is where two of our members, Ken and Michelle Jungerberg, are serving as missionaries. They help run a school and they have very little classroom space, so we will be helping them with that project.

**GRAPHIC**            **Michelle with Children in Pastocalle**

**GRAPHIC**            **School Building in Process in Pastocalle**

**GRAPHIC**            **Children of Pastocalle**

You will help provide school classrooms and uniforms and clothing for these kids through your Christmas Eve offering. Let me ask you a really important question. **Is the world brighter and more filled with life because you are here? Or is the world darker, and more filled with fear and hate?** Christ is calling us to accept his light, to live in his light and to take his light into the world. Maybe you remember this little song that you learned when you were a kid. Let's make it our prayer.

**SLIDE**            **This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.**

**Let it shine till Jesus comes, I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**Let it shine till Jesus comes, I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.**

**Don't hide it under a bushel, no! I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**Don't hide it under a bushel, no! I'm gonna' let it shine.**

**Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.**

Let's pray...

**SLIDE**            **Prayer**



*God, we thank you, that your light overcomes the darkness in our world, that no evil or dark Empire will ultimately succeed, even if it seems to for a season. In the midst of our darkness, Christ is the light and he promises to walk with us, and that he never will leave us or forsake us, and that he himself overcame sin, hatred and even death through his resurrection from the grave. We thank you that you have called us to be are instruments of light in the world. Help us to be the light to our friends and family and neighbors who are walking in dark places. Help us, O Lord, to push back the darkness in our own lives and to choose to walk in the light. Help us to shine your light brightly in this world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

## ***“Hope: Light in the Darkness”***

**Theme: The Promise of Christmas**

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-2; John 1:1-5

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon

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**Family/Community Activity for the week** – Frederick Buechner wrote, “The worst thing is never the last thing.” He can say this (and we can, too) because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ as our Savior. As a family, create a collage of hope for Advent. Gather magazines, markers, glue, scissors and a piece of poster board. Look through the magazines and cut out images that bring hope to your family. Use the markers or crayons to draw pictures and write words that communicate hope. Also include images and words representing what brings hope to the whole world. Place your collage of hope in your home where everyone can see it, or give the collage to someone who needs hope. Thank God in prayer for the hope Jesus brings to your family and all people!

**Meditation Moments for Monday, December 4** – Read Psalm 130:1-8. In Psalm 130, the psalmist said he was crying “out of the depths.” The *CEB Study Bible* said, “The term describes the destructive forces that diminish life and confront people with deadly threats.” Yet even in a time like that, he wrote, “I hope, Lord....I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord” (verses 5-6). This resilient, persistent hope is one of God’s promises for Christmas. It’s the reason we light the candle of hope on the first Sunday of Advent.

- In verse 6, the psalmist repeated for emphasis the image of a watchman in a dark, dark night (there were no electric streetlights!) waiting, hoping, for the morning. Then he said, “Israel, wait for the Lord!” (verse 7) A spiritually dark world waited for the arrival of God’s light. And the hope of a Redeemer was not empty—Jesus’ birth made that hope a reality. Where do you see “darkness” in your life? How can you mentally “change the channel” from darkness to hope?
- Waiting is hard—we’re action-oriented people. When have you had to wait for God through the darkness, until light dawned? What helps you firm up your trust that God WILL act in eternity, if not now?

**Prayer:** *O God, you know I don’t like to wait. I wish you would make everything right, right now! This Advent season, remind me that waiting for you, in hope, is one key to the good life you have for me. Amen.*

**Tuesday, December 5** – Read Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31. Isaiah 40 offered hope to Hebrews returning from exile in Babylon, speaking words of comfort and divine promise. Because God had never abandoned them, even in the days that felt the most painful and desolate, they could always keep hoping. God is in the business of “giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted.” That’s a promise we need as much as the Israelites did.

- When has God renewed your strength and faith at a time when you were faltering? How can you claim that renewed hope and strength today?
- Today’s passage addressed the weary, doubtful complaint of the Israelites in exile: “My way is hidden from the Lord, my God ignores my predicament.” In what parts of your life do you struggle with a sense that God ignores your concerns and predicaments? On what did the prophet say you can focus to renew your hope and strength?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, on so many days it seems as though my steps falter, and I’m tempted to give up. I need your strength and hope—thank you for the promise that they are always there. Amen.*

**Wednesday, December 6** – Read Isaiah 9:1-7. “A child is born to us,” said Isaiah’s prophecy, “a son is given to us.” His words of hope rang through the years. “He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” Maybe life’s darkness wasn’t permanent. In the hope of that amazing, unique birth, the promise that people walking in darkness would see “a great light” seemed worth hoping for.

- “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.” It was, and is, an awesome promise. Yet even after meeting Jesus, Paul could write, “Now we see a dim reflection” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already lit up your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full glory of God’s light?
- We sometimes overlook verse 5 of Isaiah’s promise: “Every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire.” The child to be born, he said, would be named “Prince of Peace.” How can you more fully internalize the Prince of Peace’s way of life, and resolve conflicts in his way in your day-to-day dealings with others?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, just as the sun rises every morning, your light is always there to illumine my life. Help me keep my vision alert and focused for what your light seeks to show me. Amen.*

**Thursday, December 7** – Read Luke 2:25-32. Simeon was “led by the Spirit” to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit must have also led him to Mary, Joseph and their infant son rather than to any other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. Luke said, “The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” For Simeon, this was truly a dream come true.

- Simeon “eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel,” even though the mighty Roman army firmly controlled Judea, and Israel’s religious leaders often quarreled and were at times corrupt. How can you nurture a hopeful sense of “eager anticipation” about what God is doing today, and about Christ’s return to fully establish his Kingdom?
- Verse 27: “Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.” As followers of Jesus, we are invited to pay attention to God’s “inner nudges” through the Spirit. In what ways have you sensed the Holy Spirit’s leading in your life? How can you distinguish between the Spirit’s “nudges” and other impulses that may come to you?

**Prayer:** *Lord God, I’m thankful for the story of how Simeon eagerly anticipated and welcomed Jesus. I pray that I might live my life in eager anticipation and openness to your Spirit for what you want to do today. Amen.*

**Friday, December 8**— Read Isaiah 60:1-3. This beautiful poem was probably first addressed to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The Jerusalem to which they returned had been sacked and burned—it was not, as they arrived, glorious. But God called the returned Israelites to be a light to others. God’s hope wasn’t just a show to watch passively. When the light shined on God’s people, it called them to “Arise! Shine!”

- The prophet did not call the Israelites to be glorious on their own. Instead, he wrote, “the Lord will shine upon you; God’s glory will appear over you.” God’s light and love is to shine through us to reach out to nations and kings. In what ways can you more fully take in God’s glory and love, so that you in turn, can let it shine out to those around you?
- Verse 2 described a situation every generation seems to face (and ours certainly does, when a small, violent minority of terrorists spread fear and death): “Darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations.” When have you faced a dark time? Were there people who shined God’s light for you by loving you at those times? In what ways? Who are the hurting people God wants to love through you right now?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, when the world seems the scariest and ugliest, shine your light in and through me. In place of gloom, give me a spirit that shines, not only at Christmas but all year round. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 9**— Read John 1:1-5. Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John’s gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw “the Word” (Greek *logos*) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified “*the logos*” as the world’s guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking (cf. Psalm 33:6), and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said “Wisdom” was with God at creation. Yes, said John—coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus—cf. John 1:14) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

- “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light” (verse 5). God did not shun our darkened world, but came to live here—and in this world, Jesus’ life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. Have there been times when it seemed that darkness was trying to put out God’s light in your life? What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God’s light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

**Prayer:** *God of life and light, I begin this Advent season in hope—hope that beyond the tinsel and shopping, I will find the light and life that Jesus offers me. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.*