

ADVENT SUNDAY #3: IMAGES: CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

12.12.21

INTRODUCTION

This is our third Sunday of Advent. And as we've observed this special time of year, we have been looking at "images" of our holiday celebrations that we see all around us that, if we look deep enough, we can see more — things that God would like us to consider as we celebrate the birth of his Son. Two weeks ago, we looked at Christmas lists — our wish list of gifts we would like for ourselves. When we looked deeper, we found that God has a "wish list" too. Last week we looked at Christmas cards — the many holiday greetings we extend to family and friends. And when we looked deeper, we saw how the prophecies and fulfillments surrounding Christmas are actually God's Christmas greetings and just like with our cards, all his Bible "cards" also come signed: "Love, God." Today we're going to be looking at something that we are literally all surrounded with — Christmas lights.

As we get closer and closer to Christmas Day, we see lights — beautifully colored displays showing in our own homes as well the homes all around us, inside and outside, as neighborhoods seem to be transformed into something almost magical. One of our holiday traditions has been simply to get into the car and drive around at night to see neighborhoods so beautifully adorned with the lights of the season. Even businesses get into the act — this is the 3M headquarters building along interstate 94 in Maplewood, MN. In fact, it's not unusual to see whole downtown areas completely decked out in Christmas lighting — both big cities such as Denver, Colorado, home to just over 705,000, and small towns such as Leavenworth, Washington, a town of just under 2,400. It seems that everybody feels a shared joy in bringing lights to our holiday observances. It's all so wonderful to look at, but where and when did all this beautiful lighting get started?

The original idea of bringing light to the holidays actually took the form of attaching candles to a Christmas tree, begun in Germany in the 1600s and eventually spreading over the next 200 years across eastern and central Europe. The initial purpose behind the idea? The candles were meant to signify the light of Jesus coming into the world. And there was a practical reason as well: The candles illuminated the beautifully decorative ornaments that were a part of most family's trees. The candles would be lit, the family gathered around the tree would share their "oohs" and "aahs" and then the candles would be quickly blown out. Obviously, the great likelihood of fire would often and unfortunately greatly impact a family's holiday joy.

It was in 1882 that a man named Edward Johnson, a friend and partner of renowned light bulb inventor Thomas Edison, decided to replace the candles with electric lights. His first "string" of lights was only eight bulbs long, with alternating red, white and blue colors. The idea didn't immediately catch on — although several publications took note of his idea. The public simply didn't trust electricity at this time, plus light bulbs were expensive. Johnson's simple 8-bulb string cost about \$80 dollars in today's money. The American Everready Company produced the first commercial light string in 1903, but its price tag, similar to Johnson's, meant it was out of reach for most people.

However, a couple of things happened that kept the idea in people's minds. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland, during his second term in office, had decorated the White House Christmas tree with lights. Also, department stores began adding lights to their holiday displays. And, in 1920, General Electric came out with pre-assembled lights, potentially making the idea of lights for the holidays both cheaper and more accessible. And, in the early days, due to their cost, strings of light were available for rent, so that many more people could afford some level of holiday lighting.

As for the massive displays we see today, with thousands of lights being used, that is pretty much a homegrown, North American outcome of the joy that Christmas lights bring to people. And according to sales figures, this particular "image" of Christmas is not going away.

And why not? A recent Pew research study found that approximately 90% of Americans celebrate Christmas, which translates to somewhere over 105 million households — and some major electrical bills. In fact, studies have shown that some individual states spend more money on the electricity used to "light up" the Christmas season than some countries spend on their electricity in an entire year! We do love our lights and decorations; studies show that the price tag per year in the US for items in those two categories averages approximately \$270 per person.

But that original idea of using lights as an expression of the light of Jesus is long gone for many households. Many places have organized competitions for the best decorated house, meaning that all those lights are reflecting is who's best, who spent the most, whose design was better. The "reason for the season" is no longer in view.

But reflecting the light of Jesus is still the call — at Christmas and year-round. Let's see what the Bible says about the light of God's Son after pausing for **a word of prayer!**

TEXTS

The Bible has always used the difference between light and dark as a graphic reminder of the difference between God's holy, perfect righteousness and our complete and broken sinfulness. King Solomon very clearly saw what God desired for us when he wrote: ***The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day — Solomon, Proverbs 4:18.*** That is how the world was originally intended to be. That is how mankind was originally intended to be. But, at the same time, and in the very next verse, Solomon just as clearly saw where man was found: ***But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble — Solomon, Proverbs 4:19.***

These two verses present man's ultimate dilemma in unmistakable terms: people completely entrenched and captured in the darkness of sin trying to somehow achieve the unattainable perfect light of God. Paul saw this same situation centuries later in his day, writing to the Christians at Ephesus in very stark terms: ***[Y]ou were dead in your transgressions and sins — Paul, Ephesians 2:1.*** Did you hear that? Mankind was dead — in other words, lifeless, completely unable to change the darkness of that situation.

But God had a solution — a plan of rescue that is the foundation of what we celebrate at this time of year. And I love how God himself expresses this through the prophet Isaiah: ***“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you — God speaking, Isaiah 60:1-2.***

The “light [that] has come” is, of course, Jesus Christ. And again, note the incredible assurance that God provides; this moment is so guaranteed to happen that God can express it to Isaiah and Israel and the world as if it already has.

And “the glory of the Lord [that] rises upon you?” That is the essence of “Immanuel” — “God with us.” And what a flood of Biblical truth absolutely lights up our hearts and minds when we try to come to grips with what that actually means — these are the expressions from John and Peter, two of the 12 guys who had the indescribable blessing of living with the actual experience of “Immanuel”:

- 1) ***The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth — John 1:14.***
- 2) ***[W]e did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty — II Peter 1:16.***

And we also see the incredibly amazing grace of God, that He sent His Son not into an easy world, not into a welcoming world, but rather into a world where “darkness covers the earth,” and not just darkness but “thick darkness.” That darkness was sin — a darkness so deep and unrelenting that it kept mankind separated from God. But no darkness could overwhelm the light of the arrival of that baby in the manger.

But that arrival of light was not just for a moment but rather to create the opportunity for a brand-new narrative for the entire world — found by creating a display of light and radiance such as the world has never seen, and found in two complementary ways, both of which had been foretold centuries before the incredible event:

- 1) ***[W]ith You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light — David, Psalm 36:9.*** In His coming, even as a helpless baby lying in a manger designed to be a feeding trough for sheep and cattle, the reason for His arrival would be so evident that it would seem as if we have never known life before the moment of His arrival in our lives. And then, with His arrival into our hearts, we would see the awesome and terrifying difference between the light of His life and the darkness of our own. When it came to mankind, Christ Jesus simply came to change everything.
- 2) ***I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” — God speaking, Isaiah 49:6b.*** Through the coming of this child, the intentions of God for all people, not just his people, would become clear. As we received His gift, we were simultaneously intended to present His gift to everyone around us. His transforming light in our lives was designed to become a fire of desire to share His story with all those around us. The profound difference

we found in Him was intended to inspire our reaching out with the same passion with which He reached out to us.

So, what happens when Jesus reaches adulthood and starts the ministry He came to perform? Those same impacts on our lives were consistently a part of Christ's teachings as He ministered. For instance, listen to what people gathered around Him once heard Him say: ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 8:12***. Again, the light of new life that we needed was now being actively provided through the life of Christ — His words, His works and, ultimately, His death on the cross and His resurrection. The offer of light into a very dark place was extended to all mankind — by Immanuel, "God with us."

But His light did not end with somebody simply receiving it. Another reality was to take place, as Christ Himself affirmed; upon our having received His light, as He said: [Now] ***"You are the light of the world. . . . [In other words, because Christ's light has now become your light,] let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:14a, 16***. What's so interesting about this is that Isaiah heard from God some 700 years before these words of Christ's that this is exactly what is supposed to happen: ***"Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for He has endowed you with splendor. . . . Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn"*** — ***God speaking, Isaiah 55:5, 60:1-3***. That "light" and "brightness" is not about us, but about what God has done in us. People will see it and come running. Why? Because they want that light in their own lives.

And sure enough, some 700 years later, following the impact of Christ's life on earth, the apostle Paul, in testifying of his "Damascus road" encounter with the risen Lord, heard these words from Jesus: ***"I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Acts 26:17b-18***.

APPLICATION

So, the charge for Christians is relatively simple: Once having received light, we are to become light, the light of God through Jesus Christ, to this world — and the evidence of the need for us to be "light" is made so clearly obvious to us:

- 1) From Christ Himself: ***"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 3:19-20***.
- 2) From Paul: ***The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 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 — Paul, II Corinthians 4:4-6.

That’s the “lay of the land,” so to speak; that’s the world in which we live — one filled with sin, one filled with Satan’s “darkness.” That evidence is not hard to find but is rather out there in plain sight. Sin is everywhere; we can see it and hear about it and read about it — its reality and its results — without a whole lot of effort. But, and here’s the important part, nothing of the sinful reality of our world changes our Christian, Biblical mandate, which the New Testament writings make so brilliantly clear:

- 1) From Paul: ***For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light — Paul, Ephesians 5:8.*** In other words, live as if Jesus Christ has made a difference in your life. Live in such a way that your faith looks like something that the world will notice.
- 2) From Peter: ***[Y]ou are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light — I Peter 2:9.*** This is what all of us as Christians were chosen for, to declare the praises of God, the One who has made an eternal difference in our lives by calling us out of the darkness in which He found us into the “wonderful light” in which he desired us.

You ever wonder what your purpose is? You ever wonder what in the world you’re here for? Regardless of anything like age or education or experience or any of your perceived limitations, there is our purpose — spelled out clearly for all of us — to “live as children of light” while declaring the praises of the One who made that light possible.

CONCLUSION

As we close, a couple of final thoughts. Part of why I love Christmas lights is just their beauty, all these colorful lights turning the darkness to something bright and welcoming and wonderful. You know when I miss those lights the most? The end of December and January, when all those beautiful lights get taken down. And all that magical colorful light is gone.

But for Christians, our lights should never go out. You see, not only does Christmas celebrate the Son and that amazing moment in Bethlehem, but it also celebrates the Father, the great, eternally present “I AM,” for all His honor and glory.

Maybe a verse of reminder is appropriate here, a verse again coming to us directly from God through His prophet Isaiah: ***“You are My servant . . . in whom I will display My splendor [Hebrew: “in whom I will be glorified”]*” — God speaking, Isaiah 49:3.** The arrival of the Christ-child was the ultimate display of all God is. The greatest life in the history of the planet was making His entrance into the world, and God was the author of it all. It happened because He made it happen. And this initial and greatest Christmas gift was going to be a life that reflected all the greatness of God — His love, His power, His wisdom, His passionate forgiveness, His completeness, and all His light — offering us the opportunity to become in Him and through Him complete, perfect and fulfilled — in every

way and, in the process, to be becoming His light to a world that so desperately needs His light. All that God is and everything He represents was revealed to the world in a way it had never been seen before. Never was the splendor, the glory, the light, of Almighty God more evident. No wonder the angels sang: ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” — Luke 2:14 (NKJV).***

And at the end of the day, that’s why Christmas happened — that God might receive glory. That’s what Paul told the church in Philippi: ***[A]t the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father — Paul, Philippians 2:10-11.***

Have you ever thought of yourself that way, that you are a light for God? That each and every one of us are a light for God, that each and every one of us are a means for the glory of God? That your life can be both a glory to God and, by your lighting up the world in which God placed you, bring praise to God? That’s the opportunity, that’s the life, that’s the gift, that God for His glory gave us all — in Bethlehem, when God gave the world the greatest Christmas light of all. Let’s pray!