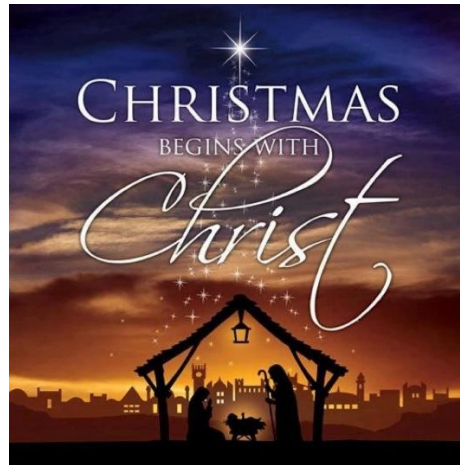


Sermon – December 24, 2021  
“The Glory of the Lord Shone”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Happy Christmas Eve to everyone! What a blessing to be able to gather this Christmas Eve and hear the words of the Christmas story read and to sing together some of the songs of the Christmas season. Last year this was a very different service. Through the scripture readings and carols, we have now heard the events of the birth of Jesus. Let me highlight a few points in these scriptures this evening, and then I want to tell you a short story that I think you will enjoy.

Let's start with Mary. Mary was living in Nazareth, engaged to Joseph the carpenter, a career man, and she was preparing to come together with him and live out her life dream as a mom and wife. Mary's "yes" to God disconnects her from her dreams, but connects her to God's plan for salvation. Mary never asks God why the road that she travels in His plan is difficult. Instead, she trusts God to make a way for her and the child she will bear. Mary surrenders her dreams and connects her life to God's plan.

Joseph hears the news that Mary is pregnant and decides to quietly divorce her. Joseph, after meeting an angel in a dream, also disconnects from his life dreams and instead decides to follow God's plan, taking Mary as his wife and adopting her son. Joseph also is disconnected from his dreams and connects to God's plan for salvation.

Mary and Joseph may have begun to endure the talk, looks, and shaming of people in Nazareth, but God calls them to go to Bethlehem. Just as Mary is approaching the time to give birth, Rome decrees that all must go to their home town for a census. Mary, Joseph, and Mary's

child disconnect from life in Nazareth, from all they know, from all of those family members and longtime friends who support them, and they journey to Bethlehem to fulfill the Roman decree and follow God's plan.

Mary gives birth to her child in a stable in crowded Bethlehem. Mary does not complain. She is not perplexed or angry with God, but gives birth, wraps Jesus in swaddling cloths, and lays him in a manger. Mary places Jesus into a messy place. Jesus comes to enter into the messiness of our lives. Mary gives birth in a humble, messy place and continues to obey God by immediately beginning to care for the baby in the place where God leads her to do so. Mary stays connected to God's plan and trusts God to provide and guide them on their journey.

Following Jesus' birth, we find shepherds residing in the fields at night, doing what shepherds do, watching over their sheep. A dim light begins to grow around the shepherds and it grows brighter until they are bathed in the bright light of the glory of God. An angel shows up to share the great good news, telling the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." They are told not that a baby has been born to Mary and Joseph, but that there is great joy to be shared, so great that the angels in heaven need to proclaim this news to any who are available. The shepherds are told not just that a baby has arrived, but who this baby is, a savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And when these shepherds are alone, when the darkness has returned, the shepherds disconnect from their sheep and go find the baby Jesus, and then go and tell everyone the news that the light of the world has arrived, a savior has come, the Messiah is among us.

Let me share a story I heard not too long ago. It is set in the days of the emperor Constantine during a time when the church was much younger and many ideas about the Holy Trinity were still being hotly debated. A growing number of people followed the teaching of Arius, from Egypt, who taught that Jesus the Son was not equal to God the Father. To address this and other discussions in the church, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council of the church. More than 300 bishops from all over the Christian world gathered to debate the nature of the Holy Trinity. The date is AD 325. At one point in the debate after Arius had argued his points forcefully and at great length, one of the bishops, the Bishop of Myra, became so upset at what he found to be an attack on himself and his beliefs of Christ as equal to God the Father that he got up, went across the assembly, and slapped Arius across the face. This action shocked all of the bishops in the council. The idea that a bishop, a man after

Jesus' heart, would slap another bishop was simply unthinkable, especially in such a solemn assembly and in front of the emperor! In response, the outraged bishops took the bishop from Myra before Constantine, the emperor. Constantine, responded that it was illegal for anyone to strike another in his presence, but that the bishops would have to determine how to punish the bishop from Myra. The council of bishops stripped the Bishop of Myra of his bishop's garments, chained him, and threw him into jail until the council ended, when they would decide what to do with him. This action prevented the Bishop of Myra from attending the council and as the primary advocate for the Trinitarian idea that Jesus and God are equals, it would tip the balance of the council towards Arius' view.

The Bishop of Myra was very ashamed of his actions, but still held firm to his beliefs about Jesus and God. There in his cell, the Bishop of Myra prayed for forgiveness, and during the night, Jesus appeared to him and asked him, "Why are you in jail?" The Bishop of Myra replied, "Because of my love for you." Jesus then gave him the Book of the Gospels, the robes of a bishop, and removed his chains, once more dressing him as a bishop. With forgiveness from the Lord and bishop's attire, the bishop from Myra studied the Gospels the rest of the night.

When the jailer came to check on the prisoner in the morning, he found him dressed in a bishop's robe, his chains loose on the cell floor, and the bishop from Myra quietly reading the Gospels. When Constantine was told, he asked that the prisoner be freed and reinstated as the Bishop from Myra to the council. Reinstatement allowed him to return to the council. In the end, the council agreed with the Bishop of Myra's position and generated the Nicene Creed, a creed that we used for part of this year and which is used regularly in many churches as a historic statement of Christian faith.

Now we might be thinking, "This is a nice story, but why is Pastor John sharing this story on Christmas Eve?" To know the answer to that question, we need to know the name of the Bishop of Myra. You see, the Bishop of Myra is St Nicholas from present day Turkey, and he was known for his generosity, once saving a poor family's daughters from slavery by tossing gold coins into their open window to provide a rich dowry for them so they could be married. This was a present that landed in their shoes and stockings hung to dry, and from that action, arose the tradition of hanging stockings for St. Nicholas. Now I will not attempt to explain how this bishop's life and love of Jesus have transformed into the present-day Santa Claus, who now has little attachment to Jesus Christ, when the real St. Nicholas was known as particularly

zealous for Jesus. So, now we know the rest of the story of the Bishop of Myra and a little of history about St. Nicholas.

We are blessed this evening to have been able to hear the words of scripture and carols, but we are not to just listen to these words of scripture and songs each year at Christmas. We also are called to follow the example of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, disconnecting from our dreams and working to respond to what we hear from the Holy Spirit. When the light of God shines on us, we are to disconnect from our dreams in this life, go search for Jesus who comes to us in the messiness of life, and when we find him, we are to share him with all to whom we are sent. We are not those waiting for the shekinah glory that shone on the shepherds to shine on us; we have the light of the world, the word made flesh, God in the flesh, Jesus. This evening we have the opportunity to come and be with Jesus. We have the opportunity to come to the Lord's table and break bread here with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't go and search in Bethlehem for a baby in a manger, but we can come and meet Jesus at his table and have Communion with our Lord, the Messiah, our savior. Prepare your hearts to meet Jesus here in the very messy place of our lives.

#### Communion

We are now going to end our Christmas Eve service with our version of the shining of the Glory of God. I will light my candle from the Christ candle and then move down the aisle, lighting the candle of the person seated on the end of each pew. Please pass the light to the next person in your pew, holding your candle up straight and letting your neighbor tip their candle to light theirs. We will listen to the hand bells play a verse of Silent Night and then sing a verse of Away in a Manger. As we end our service with candle light, let the beauty of the soft light of the candles remind us of the Glory of God that shone around the shepherds on the first Christmas Eve, and like the shepherds, go and behold the Christ child and then go to all the world and share this great news that our savior, the Messiah, the Lord of all has come!