

Keeping Watch

Christmas Eve

4:00 and 6:00 pm – Dec. 24, 2022

Isaiah 9:2-7

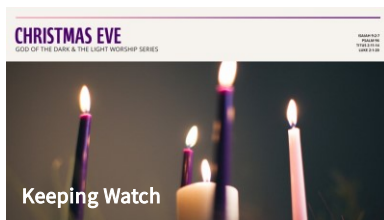
²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



As we turn to this time of proclamation, I invite you to still your mind and heart, to be intentional about emotionally and spiritually stepping away from the busyness and rush of this time of year. There is often a rush to things today and tomorrow. We hurriedly wrap last minute gifts and then kids tear open presents, one after another. We cook and bake and prepare this and that, seeking time to sit at the table. We look forward to gathering around the table, pausing to say, “Aaaahhhh...”

But to get to that point, where we can breathe a moment before digging into the ham and sweet potatoes and whatever else traditionally sits on your Christmas dinner table, well, there's a lot going on in most homes. For us, it has gotten easier as the kids have grown and I've gotten older, but I think a lot of us can still struggle to find a place for Christ to dwell in our hearts during this holy season, especially tonight and tomorrow. Too often we feel busy, rushed, harried. So, as we prepare for this time together, let us begin with a word of prayer.

Lord, we pause for a moment as we ready our hearts and minds to turn to your word for us tonight... We seek to still our spirits so that we can connect into your Spirit tonight. May your light shine upon the darkness and may the one born this day be born anew in our hearts tonight. Like Mary, may we grow to treasure Christ in our hearts tonight. And like the angels, may our voices glorify and praise you tonight. Lord, teach us to keep watch, to be alert to your presence in the world and in our lives. With that in mind, I ask that the words of my mouth and that the meditations of all our hearts would be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

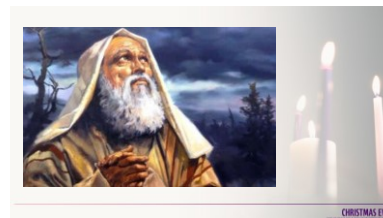
At the beginning of this time together, I spoke of busyness and rushing and chaos. If I'm being honest, though, I must admit that I used to love Black Friday shopping. I'd scan the ads found in the Rapid City Journal, trying to find that "just right" gift for loved ones and friends and then I would strategically plan my shopping route, all late on Thursday afternoon. I'd head out long before the sun came up to line up at the first store on my list. I usually went alone. No one else in my family was quite crazy enough to join me.

Except that one Thanksgiving when we went to my brother's house in Minnesota. He was sure up for the planning and execution of a great plan. But that's another story. Can any of you relate to my Black Friday story?

It was so for me because there was an excitement. A joy. A sense of adventure. Then on Christmas Day I'd watch with anticipation and expectancy as gifts were opened. Well, I still do that. But our world changed. The Black Friday shopping got a little too crazy. People shoved their way to that special gift. Tempers flared, words or worse were exchanged. Even this once joyful day has come to reflect our current culture.

I still shop for the perfect gift. I just pay a little bit more the week or two after Black Friday. Some of the gifts are bought online. The perfect gift – it is something we all seek. Friends, that is what tonight is all about – the perfect gift.

Turn with me to Isaiah 9 as we get a preview of this perfect gift. Isaiah was a prophet who lived in Old Testament times, about 700 years before the birth of Christ. Isaiah ministered



before and during the time leading up to the exile, a dark period where the sins of the people led into a time of living in a foreign land. But Isaiah is not all doom and gloom. There are many passages that reference the coming Messiah. Some people even refer to the book of Isaiah as the 5th gospel. We are beginning with verse two, which can be found on page 555 in the Bibles found under the seats. If you are using your phone, well, there are no pages. If you have your own Bible, you can probably find Isaiah.

The men and women who served as prophets and judges spoke the words that God's Spirit gave to them. In a general sense, these servants of God called the people back to God or pointed them towards God. In chapter 9 Isaiah is calling people towards God, to a time yet to come when God will become intimate and personal. In Isaiah 9 we find one of his many Messianic prophecies. In the opening verse we read, *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined."* The people of Isaiah's day would hear these words as words of hope. A light shines into the darkness of their world. Since that time, people of faith have read these words and found hope in God. As Christians, we read these words and recognize Jesus as the light that shines.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined."

- Isaiah 9:2

CHRISTMAS EVE

Drawing upon the person of Jesus, Isaiah offers more hope, speaking into the people's darkness and sorrow. Isaiah prophesies of the one who will shatter the yoke that burdens them, of the one that continues to set us free from the sin and sorrow of this world. Then, turning to verse 8, we read these words about a day to come, words that speak of the coming of Christ: *"A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* In these descriptors, we get an overview of some of what Jesus will bring to humankind. Isaiah closes by pointing to the one who will reign forever with justice and righteousness, the one who we celebrate tonight.



Turn with me to Luke 2 as we enter the story of the birth of Christ. We will work towards keeping watch with the shepherds. Luke 2 can be found on page 832 in the pew Bible. Last Sunday we worked from Matthew's gospel and looked at how out of control things felt for Joseph. As we begin our time together in Luke 2, here is another thing that was out of Joseph's control. The Roman Emperor called for a census. Everyone had to go to their *"own town"* to be registered or counted. For Joseph, that meant traveling to Bethlehem, to the city of David. Remember? David was referenced in Isaiah's text.

Joseph and a very pregnant Mary leave Nazareth and travel about 90 miles to Bethlehem, Joseph on foot, Mary on a donkey. I imagine that it was not a very easy trip for a woman who was nine months pregnant. It was there that the time came. In verse 6 we read, *"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."* Turned away by their own relatives, these weary travelers found a place to lay their heads in a stable, in the place for the host family's animals. And yet there is this miracle of a birth. Can you imagine how the weariness from the long trip and the scorn of rejection melted away as Mary and Joseph beheld their baby? Staring at the child and at one another, all in their world must have felt right. Their life felt together. That is something in the story that we can all relate to. It's like that moment when we relax around the table, when we say "Aaaahhh..." and feel as though all were right in the world.





The scene then shifts to another place where animals are the focus. In verse 7 we move from stable to pasture. As the passage transitions, we find that the shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over the flock by night. The night was the dangerous time. In the dark, things could creep close to the sheep. One had to be alert and vigilant. Often shepherds get a bad rap. In their society, they were near the bottom of the ladder. They filled a job that nobody wanted. Even in their culture, they were thought to be pretty rough characters. Staying awake all night, keeping track of the sheep while protecting them from wolves and bears and other threats, you have to be tough. And a little rugged. But predators weren't the only worry. They had to care for the sick ones and the newborns. They worried about the prices at market and about their families back home. While you and I are not shepherds, we all have our worries. We are all like the shepherds in our own way.

To the dominant religion, to the Jews, the shepherds were seen as ritually unclean. Because their job kept them away from proper worship times and practicing all the rituals, they were excluded from the synagogue and temple life. Living outdoors most of the time, unable to attend the right ceremonies, looked down upon by those in power, shepherds were outside the religious circle – unwelcomed, unwanted, unworthy. Maybe a few of us here tonight feel like the shepherds – excluded, outsiders, unwanted. While the social and cultural taboos have changed since then, maybe a few came here tonight, knowing the church would be full, thinking you could just come in and be unnoticed. Yet you are noticed. God notices that you are here.

And we want to notice too. If you are here and have been excluded in the past, if you've felt like an outsider before, if you aren't sure that you'd be welcomed on a normal Sunday, know that you are loved – and not just tonight. Know that you are loved and welcomed and valued here – anytime, not just Christmas Eve.

All in all it is pretty amazing that God would choose shepherds to be the bearers of good news. In an instant, the sky explodes with light. In verse 9 we read that *“an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”* Fear seems pretty normal. Shepherds would drive off or kill wolves and bears, but angels? That's a whole other ballgame. Imagine what it would be like for the sky to explode with the light from an angel of God.

Is this the end of the world? Will I ever see my family again? Are all my mistakes and sins coming back to get me? As quickly as these thoughts raced through their minds, perhaps sensing their fear, the angel says to them: *“Do not be afraid; for see — 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”*

What a message this is! Good news. To you a savior is born. Yes, but maybe a part of them thought, “To you?” Surely not. Maybe to the “good” people in town. Maybe to the religious leaders. Maybe to the rich and powerful. If part of you relates to this “To you?” part of the story, remember, you are loved. You are worthy. You are valued. The good news is for all people. You are part of God's story.

And then, for the shepherds, the next parts sink in. Maybe the angel was not mistaken. A child wrapped in bands of cloth. A baby nestled in a manger. Animals all around. These were things the shepherds understood. This was their world. And then, and then the song began. A *“multitude of the heavenly hosts”* suddenly appears, filling the whole sky. What a glorious night it must have been! The angels sang, *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”* At that moment, hearing these words, as glory shown down all around them, these rugged and rough shepherds felt joy and peace and a sense of belonging – *“peace among those whom he favors!”* They were certainly favored!

The shepherds looked at one another, probably blinked back a tear or two of joy, and headed into town. They went with haste and soon found the scene just as the angel had described it. There in the stable, nestled in the manger, surrounded by the animals, there was the baby Jesus. And before they went out to proclaim that the Savior had been born to all who would listen, I bet they stood in silent wonder, just staring at the child, amazed at what had come true, fully realizing that God had them just where God wanted them to be. This Christ, this Savior, he came for them too. Never again could anyone tell them that they were unworthy, that they were unloved, that they did not belong. The angel invited them into the story and standing there, they knew they belonged. They knew they were the beloved of God. I bet they went from the stable singing this same song – the one the angels sang. And I bet they kept watching, searching for others to tell the story to, eager to tell anyone the story of how God came to earth as a baby.



As we come to a close, we end with a question: what are we keeping watch over? I used to go out on Black Friday to shop for that perfect gift. I don't do that anymore, but I do still seek to engage the world. We're all called to be light in the world, to engage others. And when we do, we're not really going out to keep watch for the signs of Christ. I think that we, like the shepherds, are called to go forth to find those that Jesus came to save, to find and encourage those who are trying to find salvation in the stuff of this life. Sometimes I get caught up in that stuff too. Sometimes I forget to make room in my heart for the Savior. We all can and do. So that's part of what we're keeping watch for too – to see if we can make room for Jesus. To make room for grace, to make room for joy, to make room for love, to make room for peace, to make room for those who are like those shepherds, to make sure they know that Jesus came for them too. As we keep watch for meaning and purpose in this life, may we make room for Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As the story unfolds, the shepherds realize more and more that they are part of God's story. How has your understanding of this grown in your life?
- 2) *Pray*. When has someone shined the light or love of Christ into your life? Offer up a prayer of thanksgiving for the way that God was at work in your life.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 2:21-38. As Jesus grew and heard about these events, how do you think they shaped his life and ministry?