

“A Great Light” / Isaiah 9 / Christmas Eve 2012

Merry Christmas to you! As the light of Christ dawns on the dark horizons of our world, may a new light dawn in your spirit. May this Christmas bring you a new peace that remains yours long after tomorrow’s crumpled wrapping paper has been thrown away, a peace that remains with you even in life’s coldest and darkest seasons. For if ever the weary world needed an infant Savior, a Prince of Peace, it is today.

The Prophet declares, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Think about all the lights that we use to remind us that it’s Christmastime. Lights on our Christmas trees. Strings of lights on public lampposts. Lights around our doorways and windows. Blue lights. White lights. Red and green lights. Candles in our churches. People go all the way to Wheeling to drive among the Christmas lights at Oglebay. It’s the year’s darkest time, with the shortest days, but Christmas is our celebration of light. The boldness of our faith is to choose the darkest season of the year to declare that light has broken into our world...to cast out darkness.

Well, let me tell you about my quest for light, Christmas lights! If you spend any time on the Internet these days, you’ve come across a fictitious character known as “The Pittsburgh Dad.” He’s a regular-looking guy, except that he wears big, outdated glasses and a dazed-but-accusing look on his face. The Pittsburgh Dad has become so popular that he’s even starting to show up at televised events, like Steelers games, and he signs autographs at local malls. The Pittsburgh Dad is an online sitcom, a mini-TV show for your computer, with a new one-minute episode every week. There’s only one character in these sitcoms: the Pittsburgh dad, who scolds and complains in a way that, apparently, only a *Pittsburgh* dad can do, saying distinctly Western Pennsylvania things like, “Yinz nebbly kids better redd up in here.” One of the gimmicks in these short episodes is to show Dad at a loss, completely nonplussed by romance, or modern life and technology. I was online a few days ago when I came across a Christmas greeting from the Pittsburgh Dad, and it showed him all tangled up in those old fashioned Christmas lights that I recall from years ago. The ones with the big, multicolored bulbs.

It just so happened that the lights on our Christmas tree had given up the ghost earlier that day. Now, I admit that I do occasionally call a thorny plant “a jagger bush,” but my similarity to the Pittsburgh Dad ends there. And yet, I felt envious of Dad’s 1970s-style Christmas lights. They spoke to me of Christmases long ago, the wonder and the mystery of being a child on Christmas Eve. And so, so I set off to see if those old lights could still be purchased anywhere in the city. And they can! Apparently I’m not the only person who waxes sentimental at Christmastime, for the Christmas light manufacturers are again making strings of lights much like the ones that we used to put on our trees in the days of yore, with large, flame-shaped bulbs of every color. I happily rushed these “retro” Christmas lights home to put them on our tree. I won’t tell you the rest of that story, except to say that others at our house did not have fond memories of the big, bulbous Christmas lights of the 1970s, and back to the store they went.

But have you ever stopped to think that all our festive displays of light are just one more way that we declare with the prophet, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”? All the glittery tinsel, all the shiny decorations, all the Christmas lights—old fashioned or modern—are just our way retelling the tale, imitating the starlight that shined out over a long-ago stable in a far-off land, where—we are told—the true light that lightens every person came into our world? Light!

If by “walking in darkness” the Prophet Isaiah means to say, living in a world fraught with anxieties and uncertainties; if by “walking in darkness,” Isaiah refers to people who mostly just feel their way through life, not really understanding all that much about the other folks with whom they share the world, and their workplaces, and perhaps their homes; if by “walking in darkness,” Isaiah is referring to people who, when it comes right down to it, really don’t comprehend all that much about themselves—their own most secret motives, and drives, and passions—then I think Isaiah might just be talking about you and me. For even the best of us stumbles around in the murky shadows of human interactions, doing the best we can. Is the darkness really so far from us this Christmas Eve? Do the candles really dispel it for long? Surely you and I spend much of our lives walking in darkness. But it’s Christmas, and with our candles, and our ancient prophecies, and our strings of colorful lights, we’re declaring to all the living world that somehow—somehow—the light has invaded the darkness of this old world; the light has come to cast out fear. The old world order of darkness and fear need not control us, for he has come to shed light on our path and lead us into the ways of peace.

It’s impossible to guess the course that world history would have taken if not for one silent night, so long ago. He was a peasant child—born without prospects, born without money, born of dubious paternity. Anyone in this room might have expected a greater hand in world history. He lived only 33 years. He never traveled beyond his native country—an area smaller than New Jersey. He was probably not fully literate, never wrote a book. His teachings speak about the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, fig trees, lilies, and sparrows. He was a simple man, the product of a certain time and a certain place that—apart from him—history would have forgotten. By rights, the name of Jesus should have died out nineteen centuries ago. Any one of us is better educated, more widely traveled. We all possess more political power than he did.

And yet, Jesus is the light of a dark world because his is a teller of hard truths. “Love your enemies. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Forgive. Let the children come to me.” Oh, as hard as these truths are, after two millennia, the world still cannot turn away from them because at the bottom of our souls, we sense their rightness and their power. We know, deep down, that they are light for our darkness, so we cannot turn away, but nor can we seem to live by them. What would our world be if we did?

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And on those who dwelled in a land of deep darkness, light has shined. For unto us a child is born.” Yes, unto us 340 children are born every minute; about half a million babies come into this world each day. What will this world be for them? The hard truths that can redeem and restore the whole creation are firmly within our grasp; we know the truth that can pull us out of our economic, and social, and spiritual malaise; it is the ancient message of the Babe of Bethlehem, who grew up to say very simply, “Love God and love each other.” It’s the kind of light that can hurt the eyes, and it must shine out in our lives long after our seasonal lights have been packed off to the attic. We know—all of us know—that the light of love is the way forward for our world. And joy! Joy to the world! There is light for our darkness. There is a way forward. It’s hard, but we can do it. And do it we must. We must carry that light into our homes, into our relationships, into our pastimes, into our politics. All that we need for well-being, and for wisdom, and for peace of mind, and for safe communities and lives of fulfillment—all of it is right here within our grasp. In the New Year that lies ahead of us, let’s walk in the light of this One newborn! Amen.