

Luke 21: 25-36  
Creekside COB  
December 3, 2006

## Love Lights the Darkness

From my childhood, I have held fast to treasured memories of Christmas, especially of the days leading up to it. In Marion, Ohio, the first alert that Christmas was near was the appearance of the sign above the entrance to Crawbaugh's Hardware Store. On it was a rotund, rosy-cheeked Santa and the word, "TOYS." Soon afterward, across the street from Crawbaugh's, the manger scene appeared on the court house lawn, and on the other side of the Court House, Santa's house. No one fussed about mixing religion and politics in those days. Down the length of Main and Center Streets, boughs of real garland entwined with colored lights spanned the street, and in the center of each strand were red bells that flashed back and forth.

Every year, we piled into the car and drove around town looking at Christmas lights. There wasn't much to see in our neighborhood, so we went to the east side of town where the rich people lived. Their homes were the first to have those flashy aluminum trees with the rotating color wheels that turned the tree from red to blue to yellow to green. We "Oood!" and "Ahhhd!" as we wove our way through the streets, debating which lights were prettier-- the multi-colored or the solid-colored ones.

The best display in town was on the corner of Uncapher and Mt. Vernon Avenue. It was years ahead of its time, and must have been built by an electrical engineer. Santa, sleigh, and reindeer flashed from one end of the roof to the top of the chimney on the other, and when he reached the zenith, flashing letters spelled, "NOEL."

Those were warm, wonderful times that introduced me to the awe and holiness of Christmas. From my limited little vantage

point, life couldn't have been better. Christmas was the sign that all was right with the world. But what did I know? I had a family that loved me. I was taught that God loved me even more. I had shoes on my feet, ate three meals a day, and slept in a warm bed. Life was good and I was safe and that was all that mattered.

I knew nothing about war. I never met a starving person. My uncle fought in a war, but I had no clue of what war was about. I was unaware of the forces at work in the world that thwarted God's intentions for it. The only darkness I knew was the kind that hid night monsters in my bedroom.

I still enjoy Christmas lights and the pleasant associations they inspire. But I think we've gone overboard with outdoor décor. Miles of lights are strung from every gable, window, bush, and tree. On its next flight, I bet the Shuttle astronauts will be able to see the Christmas light extravaganza from Winding Brooke Estates in Mishawaka. Why all the lights? I have a hypothesis.

Their number is proportionate to the depth darkness we feel. Given the number and magnitude of troubles plaguing the world, people are edgy and uncertain. They are not optimistic about the future. It could be that homes consuming the greatest wattage do not even acknowledge "the great fact" upon which Christmas is founded. Maybe there is an unconscious "fear factor" at work. The greater the darkness, the greater the need for light to keep it at bay.

The gospel of Luke is synonymous with Christmas—Joseph and Mary's sojourn to Bethlehem, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, choirs of angels proclaiming peace, our sentimental picture of baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths and nestled in a manger of sweet, warm hay. But the scripture for the first Sunday in Advent is Luke 21, and it has a *decidedly different mood than Luke 2*. It is not about light and love. It is about darkness and distress.

Jesus issued a warning. "Keep your eyes open. Stay alert. The days are coming when the Big Dipper will crash into Orion. The seas shall roar. You will faint from fear because the things you

counted upon—the human institutions you trusted and the cycles of nature you thought were permanent will be ground into powder.” And all God’s people said, “Thank you, Jesus, for spoiling a beautiful Advent morning with all this unsettling talk about the world’s demise.

Advent calls us pause to ponder the incomprehensible thing God did. Out of his great love for humanity, God omnipotent became vulnerable. God almighty made a baby of himself.

Last week we sent nearly a thousand mailings to homes around the church, inviting people to worship with us during Advent. But God didn’t announce his arrival with mass mailings and advertisements. Quietly, humbly, and in impoverished conditions, God visited us. For three short years, God walked an obscure parcel of the Roman Empire teaching, preaching, and healing. He was betrayed by his own, died an agonizing, humiliating death, and rose from the tomb as unnoticed as when he came... all because he loved us.

Jesus came to redeem the world. But the world is not yet redeemed—not by a long shot. The early Christians were despised and persecuted. They lived hard lives in troubling times. The signs Jesus described played out before their eyes. They drew courage from these words because they were living the end times.

Today, many in our world understand Jesus’ signs of the times. They know about war, ethnic cleansing, famine, and suffering brought about by human hatred and devastating power of natural disasters. We who are the children of plenty have been insulated from suffering that grips much of the world and Jesus’ words are foreign to us.

But we are starting to take notice. There are signs in the sun and moon and stars and on the earth, distress and perplexity among the nations, foreboding at what is coming. Order has broken down. Human affairs have blown far off course.

**It used to be that only the hell-fire preachers ranted about such things. Now, social scientists, epidemiologists, climatologists are sounding the warnings. The ranks of the poor are growing. The needs of large segments of the population are ignored. AIDS continues to spread, and there is great concern about a devastating pandemic. The planet is warming, ice caps are melting, storms are more violent, and species of plants, birds, and animals are becoming extinct at an alarming rate.**

**There are sobering parallels between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the direction we are going in this country, while elected leaders work for their own good instead of the common good. Do you go to sleep confident that our leaders have a handle on the conditions in Iraq? Is there a plan in place to end centuries old sectarian violence?**

**When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple, the prophetess Anna, who worshipped and fasted night and day, saw Jesus, thanked God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. The world however, remains to be redeemed. Stress fractures are everywhere in this troubled time, and we are still waiting for redemption.**

**In the film, *Signs*, Mel Gibson plays the Reverend Graham Hess, a man who renounces his faith and leaves the ministry after his wife's senseless death six months earlier. He is enraged at God. He will have nothing to do with the God he blames for bringing his world to an end.**

**He goes to live in a farmhouse with his two young children and his brother when a far greater crisis comes. Aliens invade the world, but the story that follows is not about battling aliens. It is about what happens when we are overwhelmed and conditions are hopeless and we desperately need God.**

**As Graham and his brother watch TV reports of the event as it unfolds all over the world, his brother asks for words of comfort. He tells him, "There are two kinds of people in the world—those who believe there are no coincidences and God is watching over every aspect of their lives, and those who believe that**

everything is a coincidence and there is no One to turn to in times of need.” When Graham is asked which person he is, he responds, “We are all on our own.”

I want you to watch a scene from the film. The house has been boarded up, and the family sits at the dinner table for what may well be their last meal. It seems likely that the world as they know it will come to an end.

If there are only coincidences; if there is no God to pray to, or no God who will help; if all we can do is weep and hold on to is each other; knowing that we are in fact, all on our own, the darkness wins. But the message of this film is that when life seems hopeless and our prospects are most bleak, God’s love intervenes.

Jesus didn’t tell us to string up colored lights when life grows bleak. He said, “When these things take place, lift up your heads and look because your redemption is drawing near.”

Only God knows if we will wake up and correct the course on which we are headed. But Advent tells us to trust something greater that trends. I take comfort in the faith-filled observation that... “We can never take our own projections more seriously than God’s promises.”

The Bible scholar J. B. Phillips said, “Behind all our fun and games at Christmastime, we should not try to escape a sense of awe, almost a sense of fright, at what God has done. We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that *we live on a visited planet.*”

I don’t know about aliens, but we do know that *God* once walked the earth and staked a claim on it. The day will come when the Big Dipper and Orion will collide. The day will come when the last traces of human institutions will disappear. Even so, Jesus tells us to look up, because our redemption and the redemption of the world is near. We look up, because God’s future is tied to Jesus’ future, and our future is tied to his.

**Look up, because the light of his love shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness will not overcome it.**