

Nov/Dec 2024

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

The Light
Still *Shines*

ALSO: DESCRIBING GOD

Dear Friends:

How should we describe God?

In November, Pastor Ben McKnight explores a number of the Bible's descriptions of God. The Bible, God's trustworthy revelation of himself, shows us that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth; the sustainer of all he has made; the tender, loving Father of his children; the righteous and just judge; the defender of the weak; the Lord of the nations; the mighty shield of the powerless—and much more. Knowing who God is can help us grow in our love and worship of him, inspiring us to share who he is and how much he loves the world.



Each year during Advent we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And in December, Chris Schoon, a pastor working with many congregational ministries, explores the Bible's imagery pointing to Jesus as God's light coming into the world. The light of Jesus shines into the darkness of our hearts and our world, illuminating God's love for us and his plan to redeem our sin-broken world. Reflecting on Jesus, the light of the world, can bring us hope, peace, and joy as we celebrate his birth and are renewed to spread his light in this world.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Describing God”
Ben McKnight**



**“The Light Still Shines”
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TODAY (USPS 185-140), Volume 74, Number 6, published bimonthly by ReFrame Ministries, formerly Back to God Ministries International, at 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407. Periodicals postage paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan, and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Today, 1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49508-1407.

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**ReFrame
Ministries**

is the new name of
Back to God Ministries International

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december

The Light Still Shines

Chris Schoon

This month we enter Advent, the time of year when God's people remember Jesus' birth and anticipate his second coming. While we often lean into the stories of Mary and Joseph, of a donkey and a stable, and of angels and shepherds to tell the Christmas story, the apostle John describes the story as God's light coming into the world. This theme provides an opportunity for us to reflect on how Jesus brings us light in the darkness. Our devotions this month invite us to consider how the Bible uses the image of light, especially of light breaking into the darkness, to tell the whole arc of the biblical story. In this way let's reflect on the hope, peace, joy, and love that God extends to us through the light of Jesus Christ, remembering together that the Lord's "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Chris Schoon lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and has served as a pastor in both the U.S. and Canada. He is currently the U.S. director of Thrive, a ministry of the Christian Reformed Church in North America focused on equipping and encouraging churches and ministry leaders. Chris enjoys hiking, playing board games, and hanging out with family and friends. He is married to Hennie, and they have four adult children.

OUR STORY BEGINS IN DARKNESS

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
—Genesis 1:2

Beginnings are important. Backgrounds about characters in novels and movies help us see the situations that have shaped them. Sometimes we introduce ourselves by telling about our ancestors or about events that have shaped our family history. We recognize that who we are has a lot to do with the situations and the people who came before us.

Similarly, the Bible's first words about the earth are that it was "formless and empty" and that "darkness was over the surface of the deep"—a poetic way of saying that the world did not exist before God started creating. Have you ever been in a cave without any lights on? It can be so dark that you can't see your hands even when you touch your nose. The Bible begins with a darkness that is deeper than that. It's the deepest darkness the Bible writers

could imagine: the empty darkness of the world not existing.

As we begin Advent, looking forward to the light of Jesus' coming, there is something very comforting about the Bible's beginning. However heavy and impossible our current circumstances may feel, the Bible reminds us that our story begins with the God who creates life in the midst of the deepest darkness imaginable. In other words, with God there is always hope.

Dear God, create hope within us in this Advent season. Please remind us that your creative work is greater than the darkest circumstances we can imagine. Amen.

FIRST LIGHT

God saw that the light was good. . . .

—Genesis 1:4

Sometimes we need to slow down and ask good questions. Genesis 1 starts by showing that God's creative work takes place in the deepest darkness that people could imagine. That reality invites us to wonder, "What would God do first to overcome the darkness? How would God fill the emptiness that existed before he began to create?"

The rest of Genesis 1 answers those questions, and it starts with God's first creative act: creating light in the midst of the darkness. The sun, moon, and stars will come later in the creation story. But at this point God simply creates light and then calls the light good! There is something incredibly beautiful about this creative act. The first act of creation sets the stage for everything that will follow in the rest of the Bible's story: God is the one

who makes something out of nothing. God is the one who creates light.

The Bible presents God as the one who pushed back the darkness with this first light. In a way, that's what the first week of Advent is about. As we anticipate celebrating Jesus' birth, we wait in hope for God to create something new in us, to bring light into the darkest circumstances of our lives.

God, help us to see and believe that you can make something new, even in the darkest spaces of our histories and into our current circumstances. Amen.

HOLES IN THE DARKNESS

He also made the stars.

—Genesis 1:16

For several summers, our family spent time near a lake where we would lie on the dock at night, watching for shooting stars. We would point and laugh with excitement when we saw one. In between those flashes of light, we would grow quiet looking at all the stars that filled the sky. We recognized a few of them, but we had never seen most of those stars before.

In our reading from Genesis 1 today, the sun and moon get most of the attention. But we are told that God “also made the stars.” It’s as if God poked trillions of little holes in the backdrop of the night sky. Even on the darkest nights, when the moon is nowhere in sight, the stars remind us that God’s light is still present. The darkness will not overcome God’s light.

Admittedly, I long for God’s actions in my life to be as bright as the sun, as clear as a full moon, or as awe-inspiring as a shooting star. But I often overlook God’s faithful presence in the background. The stars remind us that God is always there.

This can also remind us that Jesus entered the world on an otherwise ordinary night and that God even used a star to announce his birth. Amazing! There is hope in the darkness because God “also made the stars.”

Thank you for creating stars, Lord God. We need their constant reminder that you are still at work even on the darkest of nights. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

BEYOND OUR ABILITY

"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them."
—Genesis 15:5

I wonder how many times Abram had looked into that sky, asking God to fulfill his promise from years earlier to give Abram children of his own. I also wonder if Abram had stopped praying that prayer, and when. God had promised him that the nations would be blessed through his offspring (Genesis 12:1-3). But nothing had changed. Abram and Sarai still didn't have a child.

There is weariness and sorrow in Abram's response to God: "What can you give me since I remain childless . . . ?" Here Abram is basically asking, "Can I truly believe you . . . ?"

For many of us, this is our story too. We've prayed again and again, trusting that God hears us and cares for us. Sometimes God shows up with a miraculous answer. But other times we cry out with the psalmist, "How long, LORD? Will you

forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1).

It was 25 years before God fulfilled the promise to Abram in the birth of Isaac, and nearly 2,000 more years passed before God sent Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of his promises.

During Advent, we join Abram in waiting with our weariness and sorrows. And God invites us to remember and believe that his faithfulness, mercy, and love for us extend from one end of the heavens to the other—far beyond our ability to count.

Lord, we struggle with weariness and grief. We need your deliverance. Help us to wait for you in the hope that you will fulfill all your promises. In Jesus, Amen.

A STRANGE SIGHT

Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."
—Exodus 3:3

After fleeing Egypt in fear for his life (see Exodus 2:11-15), Moses settled in Midian. He got married and had children. He became a shepherd and learned the wilderness terrain over a period of 40 years.

But then God interrupted Moses' ordinary life with the flickering light of a bush on fire that did not burn up. This strange sight caught Moses' attention and awoke his curiosity. He went closer.

What catches my attention is that God called Moses from a bush. God could have spoken with a thundering voice or sent an angel to talk with Moses. Instead God used a small impossibility—a bush burning without being consumed—to bring Moses into an even more impossible situation—leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt.

I am in awe at how God uses this unusual fire to rekindle

hope in Moses and eventually among the people of God. God had seen their misery, heard their cries, and was moving to rescue them from their suffering and oppression in Egypt after more than 400 years. But the hope sparked by this strange sight is even bigger than Moses and Israel imagined. For, one day, God would do something even more impossible by sending his own Son to free us and all of creation from our bondage to sin, death, and decay.

Lord, rekindle hope in us during this Advent season. Help us to believe the seemingly impossible good news that in Jesus Christ you are setting us free from sin, death, and decay. In his name we pray. Amen.

HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

Yet all the Israelites had light in the places they lived.

—Exodus 10:23

Have you ever encountered a darkness that can be felt? I recall hiking in the woods when dark storm clouds suddenly billowed overhead. The wind whipped around in all directions, and the temperature dropped quickly, followed by blasts of thunder and lightning. In that moment, I knew I wasn't in control.

Our Bible reading today tells part of the story of God's confrontation with Pharaoh through Moses. Pharaoh had repeatedly resisted letting God's people go free from slavery, and God had responded with increasingly intense plagues, all of which challenged Pharaoh's authority and control. This time, God brought a "darkness that [could] be felt" over the whole land of Egypt. Unlike the darkness of a passing storm, this darkness stayed for three days! It's as if God

was saying to Pharaoh: "Stop resisting me. You are not in charge. I can even remove the creational boundaries between light and dark, night and day!" But Pharaoh would not listen.

While confronting Pharaoh, God reassured Israel by giving them light and hope in the midst of the unnatural darkness, and in this God was saying, "You are mine, and Pharaoh cannot separate you from me." In Advent, we lean into this same hope-filled assurance: in Christ, God will move heaven and earth, night and day, to set us free from all that enslaves us.

God, thank you for the hope you give us in Jesus Christ. Help us to believe in your power to free us from all that can enslave us. Amen.

FACING US

“The LORD make his face shine on you. . . .”

—Numbers 6:25

I always marvel at this passage. The Israelites were not a shining example of faithfulness while they wandered in the desert. They grumbled and complained, threatened to go back to Egypt, and even made idols to worship in place of God (Exodus 16-17; 32-33). Yet God instructed Aaron—whose hands had made those idols—to bless the Israelites. Even more, God said that this would “put [his] name on the Israelites”—in other words, God wanted to be so closely identified with the Israelites that they would be part of his family!

Notice too that the middle of this blessing asks God to “make his face shine” on his people. It’s fitting to compare this image to a parent beaming with pride over their child or to a spouse absolutely glowing with joy at the sight of their partner.

This blessing is beyond what Israel could have hoped for: having God turn toward them with overflowing delight at being associated with them!

Many centuries later, God became even more associated with us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Even more than we could have hoped, God became one with us in life and in death. Through Jesus, we experience God’s face shining on us with delight. And as Paul later wrote, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

We marvel at your decision to associate with us, O God! How great is your love that you delight in us and have chosen to become one with us in Christ! Amen.

WAITING

Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. —Psalm 27:14

Today's Scripture reading describes how the psalmist has faced real threats from wicked people, enemies, armies, oppressors, and false witnesses—all bent on destroying him. The psalm includes bold declarations about not fearing those foes, and it offers pleading prayers for God's protection as opponents come near.

I have found that my experience of God's peace can change from one circumstance to the next as well. There are moments of bold faith when I am not frightened. I believe God and am ready to follow wherever he leads. Then there are times when I feel doubts overtaking my faith, and I find myself begging God to save me. In situations like that, the threats can seem bigger and more powerful than God.

This back-and-forth movement is part of our faith journey.

We recognize that if the certainty of our peace with God and our salvation depends on us, we will fall short. In Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, God secures us from all that threatens, and we are strengthened for the life of faith that God calls us into.

During the Advent season, we learn to wait in confidence, not denying our struggles but leaning into the peace that is ours through Jesus Christ, who secures us in God's light and salvation.

God, thank you for making our salvation secure in Jesus Christ. Help us to wait with confident hope that even when the world seems gathered against us, you will not forsake us. Amen.

RESTORE US

Make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

—Psalm 80:3

Today's Bible passage addresses a deep-down concern: Is peace with God ever possible after God decides to hold us accountable for our sins? As the psalmist pointedly cries out: "How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?"

The reality of God's gift of salvation in Christ does not give us freedom to do whatever we want without consequences. Psalm 80 recognizes that our sins damage our relationships with God and with each other. The psalmist describes how God's discipline of Israel is evident among the nations: "You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors. . . . Your vine is cut down . . . at your rebuke your people perish." There is no argument about Israel's sinfulness, no complaint that God's discipline

might be too harsh. But Psalm 80 returns again and again to God's character: "Make your face shine on us." God is the one who chose Israel and who cares for them. The psalmist is declaring that God is the only one who can restore them.

Advent gives us an opportunity to be honest with God about our sins. Jesus came to restore us and all of his creation from the consequences of our sin—something we could not do on our own. Peace with God is only possible because Jesus took on himself the consequences of our sin.

Lord, you know our sins. We cannot hide them or even justify them before you. Thank you for sending Jesus to restore us and to make us right with you. Amen.

LIGHT ON MY PATH

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

—Psalm 119:105

The psalmist describes God's word as a lamp and a light. There is a sense of movement here with the emphasis of the psalmist's feet on a path. We don't know where the psalmist is going, but it's notable that the psalmist doesn't say, "Your word is a light outside my house." The picture here is that God's word guides the believer through life, even in dark spaces where the path is uncertain and potential dangers may lie ahead.

This psalm reminds us that God has not left us to figure out life on our own. Rather, God's word accompanies us, showing us how to live faithfully as God's people here and now. While our technology, governmental structures, and understandings of the universe are different from when the Bible was written, the commands and the stories of God's

faithful love provided through the Bible help us to see what it can look like to walk in the light of God's path today.

As we immerse ourselves in God's word, we also learn to recognize more fully that Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's word. Jesus was sent not simply to guide us but to be "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) through whom we receive salvation and experience peace with God.

Lord God, we are so grateful that you did not leave us on our own. Thank you for sending Jesus not only to light our path in life but also to be the path to life in you. In his name, Amen.

NO LIGHT OF DAWN

If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.
—Isaiah 8:20

God's people did not always walk in God's way. At times, the leaders of God's people even consulted with mediums (1 Samuel 28:3-25). Here Isaiah notes the consequences of trying to consult the dead to find spiritual direction that only God can provide: "They will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom. . . ."

God's words through Isaiah are clear: there is no peace for someone who seeks life among the dead. Isaiah declares that the contrast between seeking God and seeking the dead is as different as day and night. Rather poetically, the prophet writes, "They have no light of dawn." In other words, seeking guidance from the dead is like walking into a never-ending night. You can't find the light of day by turning to the night.

The allure of such things is that they promise to provide quick access to the spiritual realm and to spiritual power. But that runs contrary to God's Word in the biblical story we remember during Advent. For instead of demanding that we find magical ways to access God, God has taken the initiative to seek us out. God came to us in Jesus Christ, so that through him we might have unhindered access to God himself.

Lord, we confess that we do not turn to you when we should. We seek spiritual comfort, wisdom, and direction outside of you. Thank you for giving us direct access to you through Jesus, your Son. Amen.

A GREAT LIGHT

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

—Isaiah 9:2

God provides an immediate follow-up to the passage we reflected on yesterday, about choosing to live in “utter darkness.” Because of God’s mercy, the gloom and hopelessness of consulting the dead will not be the final word on their lives. Instead “a light has dawned” on them.

Notice the unfolding impact of this “great light.” God’s people will rejoice in ways that need all kinds of metaphors to describe. Their oppressors will lose their power. The very instruments of war used to control them will be destroyed. All of these signs point to freedom and new life that the people could not achieve on their own. The joyful hope of God’s deliverance flows through this prophetic word.

Further, God promises to do all of this through the birth of

a child, whose rule will bring never-ending peace. Where death once tainted everything they saw, the people who are trapped in darkness will see God’s flourishing kingdom coming into view. To make this certain, God declares, “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

During Advent we remember how God started this rule of peace through the birth of Jesus Christ. And we look forward to the day when God will bring us into the fullness of this vision.

God, thank you for bringing your kingdom of peace through Jesus Christ. In your continued mercy, please shine your great light on all who live in darkness, apart from you. Amen.

UNBLINDING LIGHT

"I, the LORD, have called you . . . to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."
—Isaiah 42:6-7

Sometimes we use the term "blinding light" to say that a light is so bright that if you look directly at it, you could damage your eyesight. Here the Bible talks about the opposite effect—when light heals. We read that God's servant will give sight to people who are blind.

We begin to see here that God's light—shining through his chosen servant—heals, frees, and releases people who were thought to be beyond help and hope. God even declares that his light is for the Gentiles—people whom Israel thought were outside of God's care and concern. Through this prophetic word, God seeks to "unblind" the social and spiritual imagination of his people.

By extending the benefits of God's redemptive work far beyond the borders of Israel's

imagination, God's faithful servant disrupts Israel's comfortable, self-focused peace. Instead, God invites them to see that his mission is intended to welcome all people into his peace.

As we move closer to Christmas, we too are invited into this "unblinding light" of God's chosen servant, Jesus. Do we see God's redemptive work as being just for us and for people like us? Or will we come to recognize that God's love in Jesus Christ is intended to give light and peace to people we never imagined would be included in God's family?

Remove our blindness, Lord, that we may delight in seeing how wide and merciful your love is in Jesus Christ. Amen.

PEACE FOR THE NATIONS

Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
—Isaiah 60:3

Often we tend to fear what we do not understand—especially when we encounter people who are different from us. The same was true in ancient Israel. Isaiah proclaimed that God's chosen servant would bring God's blessings to people of all nations. But for the people of Israel, who had been enslaved by Egypt and overrun by Assyria and Babylon, the idea of the nations coming to them carried some fear and trembling.

Yet God reassured Israel that his redemptive work across the world would lead to a different relationship between his people and those of other nations. Instead of war and violence, the nations would come seeking the light of God's presence. Instead of demanding tribute, the nations would bring their wealth in service to God. Instead of responding in fear,

God's people would rejoice at the sight of the nations coming into God's light.

As we remember Jesus' birth, we are still waiting for this promised future. Nations are still at war. Racism, classism, and all sorts of other -isms feed our fears about people who are different from us, including within the church. So we add our voices to the prayers of God's people throughout the centuries: that in Jesus Christ, God will bring about this promised day of peace that we cannot yet imagine.

God, help us to see that you want all the nations to come to you. Remove our fears, that we may embrace the global diversity of your coming kingdom in Jesus Christ. Amen.

MULTIPLYING THE LIGHT

"You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High . . . because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven."
—Luke 1:76-78

In the first chapter of Luke many important things can attract our attention: Gabriel's visits to Zechariah and then to Mary; Mary's visit to Elizabeth and her song of justice; even the naming of John and the end of Zechariah's nine-month silence. All of these stories proclaim loudly: God's light is coming into the world!

We see this in Zechariah's song as well. Zechariah joyfully prophesies that his son, John, will be God's messenger, preparing the way for God's people. John will call people to repentance and forgiveness as God keeps his promises to free his people from their sins so that they might follow God in righteousness. Several other images that we've been considering this month are brought together in the final lines of Zechariah's song: the light of a rising sun from heaven, a

light shining on people living in darkness and even in death's shadow, and God's light guiding them on their way. God is declaring that he is about to fulfill his promises!

In a sense, then, the Holy Spirit is bringing together all sorts of little lights of God's grace that have been shared in the Old Testament. Gathered here, their impact is multiplied: God's salvation through his chosen servant is coming! And we are invited to rejoice with Zechariah, whose joy overflows at seeing this day!

Holy Spirit, fill us as you did Zechariah, that we too may rejoice in seeing how your promises are fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAWN'S FIRST LIGHT

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
—Matthew 4:17

Our Scripture reading today includes a quote from Isaiah that we considered earlier: God's light will dawn on the people who live in darkness, ushering them into new life in God's kingdom (Dec. 12). That promise is fulfilled in Jesus and is cause for great joy!

The context of this passage gives us even more reason for joy. Jesus leaned into Isaiah's prophecy in response to the news of John the Baptist being jailed, showing that John's ministry of preparing the way for Jesus was now complete. Jesus also moved to a different area to make clear that he was and is the long-awaited fulfillment of God's promises. He is God's light of salvation living among us!

Further, Jesus put the first light of dawn from Isaiah into action by preaching that everyone should repent because

"the kingdom of God has come near." No longer is God's promised salvation off in a distant future. God's kingdom has come near! After centuries of waiting, God's light is breaking into the darkness and calling all people into the freedom of God's kingdom.

As we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth, that joyful first light of dawn comes to us as well: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"! Jesus continues to invite us into freedom from the sin and darkness that has overshadowed us.

Jesus, we hear your invitation to repent. Help us to turn away from our sins and from the darkness in order to live in the light of your salvation. Amen.

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." —John 8:12

The text in our reading for today is centrally focused on Jesus' identity. He declares, "I am the light of the world . . ." leaning into God's covenant name "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is making the claim that he is God, because that's who he is.

But there are also implications here for all who follow him. Jesus asserts that anyone who follows him "will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." When we're honest with ourselves, we admit there are many times when we stumble in our faith. Sometimes we make deliberate choices to sin. At other times we fail to do the good that we could have done. At times, we still choose darkness. So, what do we do with Jesus' words that his followers "will never walk in darkness"?

Until this point, the Israelites were taught to follow God's

commands and to offer certain sacrifices in order to be right with God. But now Jesus reorients their righteousness to himself. The good news Jesus proclaims is that instead of trying (and always failing) to be righteous before God, people can receive the light of Jesus' perfect life that he extends to us (2 Corinthians 5:21). By God's grace, all who follow Jesus have the light of life not because of what *they* do, but because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Hallelujah!

Thank you, Jesus, for your faithfulness and your sacrifice on our behalf. We praise you that the light of your life makes us right with God! Amen.

SHINING IN OUR HEARTS

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts. . . .
—2 Corinthians 4:6

Today's Bible passage calls us back to the creation story, reminding us that the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," is the same God who is working in us today. And God's work here is about creating the light of faith within our hearts.

The text tells us that "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers." They are unable to recognize Jesus Christ for who he really is. They might see him as an interesting historical figure or someone who lived a moral life worth imitating. Some might say that Jesus challenged political and religious structures to the point that people in power had him killed. While these things may be true, they are merely shadows in comparison to the light of who Jesus really is.

By the light of God's creative mercy, we see that Jesus, who

was born in Bethlehem, is "the image of God" in human form. In Jesus, the light of God's glory has entered our world, living, dying, and rising among us so that we might see the full extent of God's love. In joyful response to this merciful work in our hearts, we join the apostles in renouncing "secret and shameful ways" in order that we might proclaim Christ as the light of the world.

God, we confess that we need your light to shine in the darkness of our hearts. By your mercy, we renounce our sinful ways so that the joy of your love may overflow through us. Amen.

AS LONG AS IT IS DAY

“As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me.”
—John 9:4

As we draw closer to the celebration of Jesus’ birth, it’s important to remember why Jesus came. Several times in the book of John, Jesus talks about doing the will of God, who sent him. In today’s passage Jesus tells his disciples, “We must do the works of him who sent me.” Though he doesn’t say here what those works are, Jesus shows through his actions who he is and why he came.

Jesus gives sight to a man who was born blind. When we read further in John 9, we find that this healing caused quite a stir among the crowds, the Pharisees, and even the man’s parents. People born blind don’t get their sight back—at least not until Jesus comes along.

As he sets the stage for this healing, Jesus declares, “As long as it is day, we must do the

works of him who sent me.” In this episode Jesus is making a bold claim and showing that he is God’s chosen servant.

As Isaiah 42:7 proclaimed, God’s servant would “open eyes that are blind” (see also Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19). God’s will for Jesus was to usher in the renewing kingdom of God. God’s kingdom brings healing and includes all whom he calls to believe in him—from all backgrounds. The healing and inclusion of all kinds of people provide the joyful evidence that Jesus truly is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

God, overcome our blindness to the nature of your kingdom. Help us see that Jesus is your chosen servant, through whom you are ushering in your kingdom. Amen.

BECOMING CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

“Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.”
—John 12:36

By this point in John’s gospel, Jesus has declared a couple of times that he is the light of the world. This image is intended to draw us into the creation story, as if to exclaim: “God is making a new creation in Jesus!” This is incredibly good news! God the Father is responding to the long history of human sin and its legacy of darkness with the light of his own Son.

We don’t often focus on this new-creation side of the story at Christmastime. We usually hear about the miraculous events that led to Jesus’ birth, that Jesus is “God with us,” and how the angels and shepherds played their parts in announcing Jesus’ arrival (Matthew 1; Luke 2). But the new-creation side is important too. John’s attention to Jesus as the light in our midst is re-creational language. God is doing something new!

In the passage we are focusing on today, we hear Jesus calling for a decision. Will we believe in him, trusting that he really is God’s light signaling the start of a new creation? Will we become children of that new creation—both as recipients of God’s grace and as family representatives of God’s new creation?

We are invited to remember and celebrate Jesus’ birth as people who are joyfully caught up in the arrival of God’s new creation.

God, thank you for starting a new creation in Jesus. As we remember Jesus’ birth, grow in us a joyful faith and desire to live as your children. Amen.

OUT OF AND INTO

You are a chosen people . . . that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

—1 Peter 2:9

As a pastor and teacher, I have met with many people who have wondered, “What is God’s will for my life?” Many of us deeply desire to know where we belong and what our purpose in life is.

Peter describes God’s calling on us in terms of two movements. First, God calls us “out of darkness.” The reality is that we can’t see God’s purposes for us when we are caught up in the darkness of our own sin. God calls us out of the behaviors and perspectives that diminish the abundant life he offers to us through Jesus Christ.

Second, God calls us “into his wonderful light.” Jesus is calling us into a new way of life and a new identity that is characterized by a genuine, lavish love for our neighbors and enemies alike. We are called to “live such good lives” that people

may see our actions “and glorify God on the day he visits us.” The light that God calls us into in Christ is not simply to help us see God more clearly but also to help people around us to recognize God’s goodness through us.

Our Christmas celebration is not simply about remembering Jesus’ birth. It is a radical calling to live throughout the year as people who share and shine the wonderful light of Jesus Christ in this dark world.

God, in your great mercy, lead us out of sin and darkness and into the light and life of Jesus Christ so that we and the whole world might praise you for who you are! Amen.

SEEING GOD

"The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me."

—John 12:45

Sometimes when I read the Bible's stories about Jesus, I am baffled at the doubts, disbelief, and outright opposition that people showed in response to Jesus. What more did Jesus need to do for people to believe? How many more miracles? How many more people had to be healed or raised from the dead? Matthew 28:17 tells us that even some of Jesus' closest disciples doubted after Jesus himself had risen from the dead!

I have also wondered if I would have recognized Jesus if I had met him. I'd like to think I would. But the Bible includes lots of accounts showing that people with the most religious training, the ones who should have quickly recognized Jesus, were also among those who had the most difficult time believing in him. What would I need to see Jesus do in order

to believe that he is really God? Maybe it would have to be a particular miracle or a certain level of wisdom that confronted my assumptions. This question becomes even more challenging when I think about Jesus being born as a vulnerable baby in the backcountry of an occupied territory. Would I recognize him then?

Jesus says that "the one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me." When we look at Jesus, we are seeing God. As we celebrate Christmas, are we willing to see God the Creator of heaven and earth in the face of Jesus?

Jesus, the signs and wonders of your kingdom are amazing. Help us to recognize you for who you really are: God with us! Amen.

LIVING BY THE LIGHT

Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light. . . .

—John 3:21

With Jesus' birthday celebration just two days away, this is a fitting time for us to remember why Jesus came into the world. This passage begins with the memorable declaration "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. . . ." Because of his great love, God sent Jesus.

John's gospel also tells us that Jesus came into the world as a matter of life and death: ". . . that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John also clarifies that Jesus' purpose is to save the world, not to condemn it. In these verses we see that Jesus' saving work has both personal ("whoever believes") and cosmic ("the world") audiences in view. Jesus' birth is good news for you and me and for the whole of God's creation! God wants us to be saved for eternity.

Finally, God's desire is that people will live by the light of Jesus' life. John contrasts people who live in the light with those who live in darkness, noting that "people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." Darkness is a way of life. But so is the light. "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light." Jesus came into the world so that we can embrace God's way of life as our own here and now.

God, thank you for your amazing love that has sent Jesus. We could not save ourselves. Help us to live by the light of Jesus forever. Amen.

LET'S GO AND SEE!

"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."
—Luke 2:15

The shepherds are relatively obscure actors in this story. We don't know their names. We're not sure if they are hired hands or tending their own flocks. They hear the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth. They run to find Jesus. And after they return to their flocks, we don't hear from them again.

Even so, the shepherds pull me further into this story. They begin in a rather ordinary space, "living out in the fields" with their sheep. When the angel suddenly appears, they are terrified! Who wouldn't be? Nothing could have prepared them to meet angels shining the light of God's glory in the middle of a field at night. Then quickly they move from terror to wonder to delight and finally to joyful worship. By the end of the night, the shepherds are the first human messengers to

share the good news of Jesus' birth! Like the people whom the shepherds first told about Jesus, I am amazed at what I hear.

After the angelic choir disappears, the shepherds urge each other: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." What else could they do? As I read this story again, I find myself responding to the shepherds: "Yes! Let's go and see, looking into the amazing good news of the child who has been born in Bethlehem!"

God, whether we've read this story before or we are hearing it for the first time, awaken in us the joy and wonder of the good news of Jesus' birth! Amen.

THE SHINING LIGHT

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
—John 1:5

Everything has led to this moment: Jesus is born!

John frames the announcement of Jesus' birth through the lens of the creation story. Borrowing from Genesis 1, John writes "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John states clearly that Jesus is fully God. This passage also makes clear that Jesus is fully human: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." In Jesus, God became one with us!

Also connecting with the creation story is God's light that "shines in the darkness"—as well as the insight that "the darkness has not overcome it." Though Jesus is the "true light that gives light to everyone," not everyone recognizes or receives him. Yet to all who respond to the light of Christ,

he gives them "the right to become children of God."

By leaning into the creation language from Genesis, John declares that Jesus' birth is the start of God's new creation! In Jesus, God has created a new humanity, and he invites us into the light and life of this new creation by receiving Jesus.

Will we receive Jesus today? Will we be part of God's new humanity and step into the light of God's grace and truth?

God, help us to recognize and receive Jesus today. Make us like him so that we too may overflow with the light of your grace and truth. Amen.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:16

Speaking to the crowds that have gathered to hear him, Jesus declares: “You are the light of the world.” Jesus, the light of the world, is placing his own title onto the crowds. In doing so, he transfers his identity to them. Similar to when God directed Aaron to bless the Israelites and put his name on them, Jesus repeatedly blesses the crowds throughout the first part of this passage. Then he gives his identity to them. They are the light of the world, because Jesus has chosen them to be his light in the world.

Jesus makes clear that this new identity is not intended to be hidden or kept private. Rather, the people’s new identity in Jesus is to be as bright as a city on a hill—visible for all to see. He adds that their light is made known through their good

deeds and will lead others to glorify God.

Yesterday we celebrated Jesus as the light of the world, signaling the start of God’s new creation. Today we see that God has saved us in Jesus in order to shine the light of Jesus through the way we live. Though our actions do not save us, our good deeds and our sharing of God’s love help others to believe that God’s new creation has become real and available to us in Jesus Christ.

God, help us to celebrate Jesus’ birth by making the light of Jesus more real and believable through lives that shine brightly, reflecting your love and goodness in the beauty of your new creation in Christ. Amen.

LIVING LIKE JESUS

Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. —1 John 2:10

How do we know what it looks like to walk in the light of Jesus Christ? Throughout this letter, John repeatedly notes two things, asking, in effect: Do we believe that Jesus is God, and do we love the people we can see? In our reading for today, John brings these two together as he writes, “This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” In other words, believing in Jesus leads to living like Jesus.

Using the imagery of light and darkness again, John explains that hate for our brothers and sisters does not fit with the light of Jesus’ life. Rather, a lack of love for others is evidence that we are still living “in the darkness.” Holding on to hate leads us further and further into darkness. Yet the opposite is also true. The more we love others, the more we live as

Jesus did. John even makes the claim that when Jesus’ followers love their brothers and sisters, “there is nothing in them to make them stumble.” The light of God’s love living within us leads us to embrace a life of love for others.

Jesus said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

God, we want the light of Jesus to shine brightly in and through us. Teach us to live and love as Jesus did. Amen.

ALMOST HERE

So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.
—Romans 13:12

Our Advent and Christmas celebrations teach us to look in two directions at the same time. We look back to remember how God sent Jesus as the light of the world so that we might become children of the light, God's children. We also look ahead to when Jesus will return and fulfill his work of making all things new.

Writing to the early followers of Jesus in Rome, Paul urges them: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." In a way like John, Paul teaches that "love does no harm to a neighbor." This is the light of Christ living in us.

But Paul frames this command not simply as a response to what God has already done in Jesus. A forward-looking urgency comes into view as

well: "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here." This is not a threatening, fear-inducing urgency meant to guilt us into grudgingly loving others. Rather, this is joy-filled, overflowing excitement that leads to action. Jesus is almost here! Let's get ready for his arrival!

How do we do that? We get dressed. "Let us put aside the deeds of darkness"—any behavior and attitude that can harm our neighbors—"and put on the armor of light"—love for our neighbors, through which the love of Christ is fulfilled in us.

Holy Spirit, we are excited for Jesus to come back! As we look forward to that day, help us to clothe ourselves with the love of Christ in each and every relationship we have. Amen.

ALL HIS BRILLIANCE

His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

—Revelation 1:16

As Jesus taught and as John experienced, following Jesus will likely mean that others will resist and reject us. In some places, identifying with Jesus might even lead to prison, beatings, and death. The darkness of people who are opposed to the light of Christ can be powerful and violent. John notes here that as followers of Christ we are companions in suffering and, as well, in “patient endurance” as we await Jesus’ return.

John knew Jesus. He had lived with Jesus for three years. He was there at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8). He saw Jesus after the resurrection and when Jesus ascended into heaven. John knew what Jesus looked like. But none of that prepared John for when Jesus showed up in all his brilliance. John fell down like a dead man.

Yet in this encounter Jesus immediately extended hope, saying, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!”

Jesus said this to John, and he says it to us. Death, the greatest weapon that is opposed to God’s abundant life, has not diminished Jesus. The present darkness that we experience has already lost the war. Jesus’ reign has begun. He is alive and overflowing with more glory and light than we could ever imagine.

Lord Jesus, strengthen us with certainty in your victory over death. Give us glimpses of your brilliance to sustain us now, even as we look forward to the fullness of your presence. Amen.

MORE THAN A NEW BEGINNING

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.
—Revelation 21:24

In Genesis 1, God's first creation is light. Amazingly this first light appears in the darkness before the sun, moon, and stars are even created. Today's passage echoes Genesis 1: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." God's glory is the source of light, and Jesus is the vessel through which God's light shines in all its brilliance!

This passage about God's new creation can make us feel like it's the first day of creation all over again, a fresh start. But that brings up a question: What if we sin again? We're still human. Won't we make a mess of this new creation just as we have done with the current one?

As if anticipating that question, God shows John that the nature of human relationships,

of kings and kingdoms, will be transformed. "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it." Through Jesus Christ, God is bringing about a new creation in which the power struggle to control resources and the distrust and hatred between people groups no longer exists. The whole of this new creation delights in God's goodness and lives together as stewards of God's creation! What a day that will be!

Creator God, thank you for making the future of this peaceable kingdom secure in Jesus Christ. As we celebrate Jesus' birth, teach us also to look forward to his coming kingdom with joy-filled confidence. Amen.

NO MORE NIGHT

There will be no more night.

—Revelation 22:5

Throughout the Bible, God uses the metaphors of light and darkness and of day and night to highlight a constant tension. Will God's light flourish and fill creation, or will God's creation fall back into the original darkness, the formlessness and emptiness in which God started to create?

We feel that tension every time we hear about another war, natural disaster, or corrupt leader. The tension comes home when we don't have enough money to make ends meet, when our relationships break, and when we receive news that the battle for life and death is in our own bodies. We wonder, "Will we ever get out of this mess?"

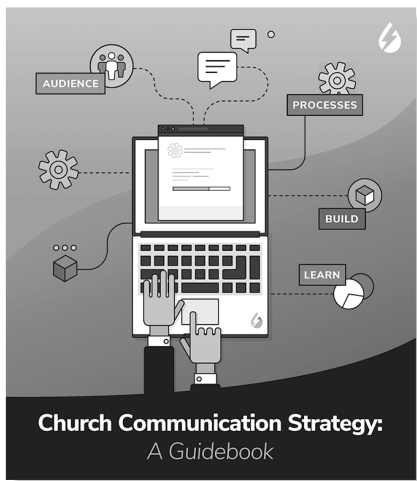
God gently reassures John and us that our present sufferings will not have the final word. God shows John that through Jesus a day is coming when

all of life will flourish beyond John's wildest imaginings. Fruit trees whose very leaves bring healing to all the peoples of the world will flourish in the heart of God's new creation, bearing new crops every month!

God also reveals that "there will be no more night" in this new creation. The threat of darkness and all that it symbolizes throughout the Bible will be removed. By God's lavish grace, evil will no longer distort or diminish life anywhere within God's new creation. Even now, God is at work making everything new!

Hallelujah! Lord God, equip us to live confidently, even boldly in expectation of your new creation. Please bring this day about soon, we pray. Come, Lord Jesus!

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