“Jesus: The Everlasting Light”
December 26, 2010 First Sunday of Christmas

Sermon
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Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Introduction
Because the first Sunday after Christmas falls only one day after Christmas, we have chosen to remain focused on the texts having to do with the Nativity of our Lord rather than on those normally assigned to this day. Our attention is on Jesus the everlast light, a theme immediately present in the Isaiah reading, but further elaborated by the theme of splendor in the Psalm. Christmas as the nativity of Jesus is about more than the facts of a single day. Traditionally, the feast of Christmas stretches from December 25th through January 6th, comprising the so-called “twelve days of Christmas,” and climaxing with Epiphany — the feast of the Magi’s arrival at the house of the newborn king. One could argue that the light of the Christ child shines forward in time, casting its rays well into the future of the Church’s New Year which began with the first Sunday in Advent. The beauty of the liturgical year is that it invites us to re-enact the same events each year, renewing our hearts in commitment to Jesus Christ our Lord, our Light.

Light is an especially wonderful phenomenon of nature, the first of God’s creative acts as contained in the familiar words of Genesis 1:3: “Let there be light.” Science tells us a good deal about light, starting with the remarkable fact that it travels 186,282 miles per second. Albert Einstein famously connected space and time through the speed of light as a constant (E=mc²). Under ideal conditions, all things (matter and energy) can travel up to this speed. An amazing fact about objects we see in the astronomical heavens is that their appearance is due to light traveling from them to us at this constant speed. The distance from Earth to a certain galaxy is measured in light years. Thus a given object may well be thirteen billion light years away from us, which means that its appearance is due to light propagated some thirteen billion years ago. Seeing such numbers increases our awe at the God whose Son is the Everlasting Light.

Such light is more comprehensive than the energy associated with sun, moon, and stars. Scripture reminds us, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5), and also that in the future creation will no longer need the natural light of the sun for “the glory of God gives it light” (Revelation 21:23). Further, Jesus as the Word (John 1) is the “true light who comes into the world” (John 1:9) and is superior to the darkness which it overcomes (1:5). This same text reminds us that the life which the Word brings is also light for human beings (1:4). Much is made of the battle between light and darkness, and yet, simply put, darkness is nothing and light is everything in that context. As a Chinese proverb eloquently puts it, “Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” St. Augustine reminded the Church that evil, like darkness, is itself not something, but rather the absence of light.1

Christmas day and the days which follow it are bathed in this light of God found in Jesus Christ who is the “light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5). This week’s study explores the significance of Jesus in these terms of unusual illumination. His light is not extinguished by the surrounding darkness. His appearance in the world is not a passing event which is here today and gone tomorrow. His glorious presence does not fade as do the dying embers of waning fire. He is the everlasting light.

The Light Has Dawned
Isaiah 9:2-7 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. And you have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that

1 Augustine, Enchiridion, 10-12.
burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah is no stranger to the readers of Advent texts, and his words concerning the future Coming One remain especially beloved today. Isaiah 9:1 begins with gloom and doom amidst a darkening situation in ancient Israel. We have spoken about this in previous studies. World powers around both the Northern and Southern Israelite Kingdoms aggressively seized land and toppled kings. These were the days of the Empires: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome — each in succession. Who will rule the world? Who will write the narrative of the world? These questions dominate the geo-political landscape in Isaiah’s prophecy. In today’s reading, people are walking in darkness, an apt caricature of the prevailing situation in the kingdom of Judah where Isaiah is assigned to the court of the king. The immediate context seems to be events taking place in the land of Judah (the Southern Kingdom). Although the great Assyrian Empire brought to extinction the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.E., Jerusalem in the south was spared, along with the citizens of Judah. Future Assyrian attempts to eliminate the rest of Israel would also fail.

“A great light” would appear to the darkness walkers. A dawning light would shine on “those living in the land of the shadow of death.” This language echoes the poetry of Psalm 23 where the psalmist walks through “the valley of the shadow of death” but fears no evil since Yahweh is with him, guarded by rod and staff. For Isaiah, the warriors’ fierce armor and oppressive force have been broken, and the implements of war dragged like dead branches as fuel for the fire. A strong word, “shattered,” describes the way God defeats the enemies of His people. From the Hebrew word hatat, it means to “dismay, terrify, abolish, annihilate” and is a common expression for God’s thorough judgment on evil. The great light of God shines in judgment for the release of His people from their burdens, suffering, and death. Yahweh achieves fundamental change resulting in a reversal of their fortunes. Here are expectations fulfilled. In some ways they are expected outcomes. Yet, how can these results possibly be produced, considering the darkness of the times? In what way will the "light" be turned on and dispel the darkness? Whom can God’s people trust to bring about so great a victory? Expectation for outcomes must be matched by trust in the One who makes them happen.

Suddenly, without much preparation, the prophet's words shift dramatically to a wholly unexpected event: a birth filled with faith-inspiring confidence. It is true that Isaiah had become accustomed to "birth announcements", since, earlier in his prophecy, God had given him a series of "signs" in the form of "sons" that would be born (review Isaiah 7:14; 8:1-4). At one point, overwhelmed by the "signs of the sons," Isaiah cries out: "Here am I, and the children Yahweh has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from Yahweh Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion" (8:18). The "sign," in Hebrew, is 'ōth, the simple pointing to something beyond itself. The "symbol" is mōphēth (sounds like "mo' faith"!), a derivative from the word 'āphath which means a "wonder" or "portent". In the Old Testament the "symbol" refers to special displays of God's power (Exodus 7:3; 11:9, and elsewhere). One further meaning is "sign or token of a future event" and might involve the prophet in performing a symbolic action (Isaiah 20:3) which embodies that event. More importantly, as in 8:18, persons become the symbols of a deeper reality (compare Zechariah 3:8). The Old Testament uses verbs of trust in conjunction with words for sign and symbol.

Now, in 9:6-7, we are allowed a deeper look at the "child" previously offered as a "sign" in Isaiah 7:14. What's most striking about this child is the extreme weight of confidence placed on him, almost out of proportion to his being a child. Throughout history in nations which had inherited monarchies, the birth of a prince or princess
to the royal household was a momentous event. The future rested with the ability for the king's wife to bear him a child—an heir to the throne. The nation of Southern Israel was no exception. David's ascent to the throne in 1000 B.C.E. marked the beginning of what historians call a dynasty. The English word comes from the Greek root *dunāō, "to be able or to have power to stand". Put simply, the dynasty is that which remains standing throughout time.

Part of God's promise to David was that he would always have a descendent sitting on his kingly throne:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house [read, "dynasty"] for you: 12 When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. 15 But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:11-16).

In his prayer after his coronation, Solomon, David's son and heir to the throne, prayed to Yahweh:

Now therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, You shall not lack a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me (1 Kings 8:25).

Then, as the first "sign" that God would secure David's dynasty, Yahweh said to Solomon:

If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you (1 Kings 11:38).

Why was it important to have an unbroken line of David's sons occupy the throne of Israel? Because in a real sense, they symbolized and embodied God's everlasting rule on earth. They were the regents of the Kingdom of God. They served Yahweh who was the supreme king of all the world, and they were called to put into effect His royal decrees and holy laws among His people. As these texts indicate, such kings were not just "sons of David," but were actually treated as "sons of God". Notice again 2 Samuel 7:14, cited above: "I will be his father, and he will be my son." The role of king as son meant that the king bore the image of his father, or at least the people trusted in him to do so. After all, the king of Israel ruled on behalf of God and for God's will. The earliest origins of the idea of "God's Son" appear here in the discussions about the king who rules as God's vice-regent. The Psalms, especially those which celebrate the enthronement of the king, support this view. One particular "royal Psalm" is this one, excerpted here:

6 "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." 10 Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:6-12).

Notice how the Psalm encourages the people "to take refuge" in the king who is God's Son (2:12). Here, once more, is the language of trust in God's appointed One who has God's supreme confidence and represents Him in all that he does. The command "Kiss the Son" encourages appropriate behavior in the presence of a king. Knowing that the king is God's Son invites proper respect and homage--and trust. We tend to trust that which we deeply respect.

What are we to make of this "son-who-is-the-king" language which describes the Davidic dynasty and now appears in Isaiah 9:6-7? From the outset, the birth of the "child" is a sign that God is present among His people. Let's first consider this from Isaiah's perspective. He lived in the days of several kings of southern Israel, including the king who reigned during the giving of this specific prophecy about "the child born", namely, Ahaz. But Ahaz was a horrible king (refer to 2 Kings 15:38-16:20; 2 Chronicles 28:1-27) and was hardly the purest embodiment of "David's son" who obeyed Yahweh. Quite the contrary, Ahaz corrupted the true worship of Yahweh with pagan practices, plundering the Temple to keep his enemies at bay. One could only imagine the anxiety among the faithful in Judah who looked forward to the "birth" of a faithful and righteous king--someone in whom they could put their trust. Ahaz was not that person. But the prophecies of Isaiah still
seemed to point to the offspring of Ahaz as holding the key. As it turned out, in the years following this prophecy, such a child was born and his name was Hezekiah which means "God is my strength". To reiterate what the historian tells us in Kings:

Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him (2 Kings 18:5).

Throughout Hezekiah's life, the whole burden of Judah's national life rested on his shoulders, and, for a brief moment in time, the people of God took refuge in his leadership and trusted his rule, guided as it was by the prophetic word of Isaiah. In a real sense, the near-term fulfillment of Isaiah 9:6-7 was found in Hezekiah and his rule. After the long dark administration of King Ahaz, this young twenty-five year old king was God's breath (read, "Spirit") of fresh air, blowing across the Judean landscape. Good things happened during Hezekiah's rule, and they resulted from his confidence in Yahweh, and the people's confidence in him because of it. Still, something about this prophecy remained "left over", as it were. Yes, Hezekiah was a marvelous fulfillment of much found in this passage. But even he would disappoint and nearly betray his nation through pride into the hands of her enemies (see 2 Kings 20:12-19). Yahweh predicts the birth of "future sons" but they would be exiled to Babylon, suggesting that the promised throne of David would lie vacant and the promise made to Hezekiah would not last but a few more generations.

While we might admit literary license and hyperbole in its language about Hezekiah, something else remains just below the surface. What does the text actually say about this "child" on whom rested the future of God's people--and the world? In summary:
1. For us a child is born, a son is given
2. Authority will rest on his shoulder
3. Proclaim his names!
   a. Wonderful Counselor
   b. Mighty God
   c. Everlasting Father
   d. Prince of Peace
4. David's dynasty will be firmly established.
5. Justice and Righteousness will prevail forever.
6. The zeal of Yahweh will achieve all of this.

**Child Born; Son Given**
The Hebrew text reads:

\[ yeled yūllad lānū \\
 bēn nittan lānū \]

In Hebrew poetry (which this passage illustrates), this is a parallelism in which a repetition states either 1) the same thing (synonymous), 2) a developing thing (synthetical), or 3) an opposite thing (antithetical). We can rule out #3, leaving us to decide between #1 and #2. To the Western mind, there appears to be a difference (#2), simply because "child" suggests a very young person, while "son" denotes gender. We might paraphrase, "A baby has been born, and, look, it's a boy!". The Hebrew may well suggest a difference too, but moving in a slightly different direction. Actually Isaiah 7:14, "a virgin shall be with child…called Immanuel", is the preface to this current passage (9:6-7), and the following sequence is implied: 1) virgin conception;2) child (yeled) is born; 3) son (bēn) is given. Connected in this way, "son is given" means, as we have already noted above, the promised "son-who-sits-on-David's-throne" comes to God's people as His gracious gift. What's important is that the child's given name is "Immanuel", that is, "God is with us", "God is present" when the child is conceived and is born.

And so, when we reach the clause, "son is given", it dawns on us that the God who is with us has in fact become our king once again. This is, then, no ordinary child who sits on David's throne. In a real sense, it is God sitting
on the throne, having taken up residence among us. Did the contemporaries of Isaiah hear that nuance when they listened to his message? We might well ask, "Did Isaiah himself infer this deeper meaning?" To which, Isaiah's own reflections would aptly apply: "...we are signs and symbols in Israel from Yahweh Almighty who dwells on Mount Zion..." (8:18). Among those "children" would be Hezekiah himself (not in a literal sense, of course, but as a prophetic "son", following the prophet's instructions). Hezekiah as fulfillment was still only sign and symbol of the God who was present on Mount Zion. All of Israel waited for the day when the sign and the symbol became a reality at last. No longer would the words of the prophets remain enigmas not yet understood. Finally, God would be conceived, born and ruling among His people again. In so doing, we have moved from the "near-term" to the "long-term" fulfillment. That's the nature of "sign and symbol": they are intentionally ambiguous and allow for further investigation and deeper understanding. They can be explored and examined, probing for their rich meanings.

He who is the child is also the son, that is, "the king", God Himself. In the Advent, God has given us nothing less than Himself, His grace in action, His grace embodied. Finally, there stands in human history a real human being, born of a human mother, yet himself the gift of God. Here we can place our trust; here we can put the full weight of our confidence. Twice the little poetic couplet tells us that this child, this son is "for us" (lāmū). In the coming of Jesus "God is for us", a phrase from Paul inspired by texts like this one:

If God be for us who can be against us? He would spared not His own Son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32).

In God's gift "for us" we have the confidence that He has our best interests in view. Because the "son is given", we are made aware that our trust rests on the grace of God. And in this are also echoes of John 3:16, "For God so loved...that he gave his only begotten Son...".

In this text we also have intimations of the Abrahamic covenant and Yahweh's pledge to raise up a child, born of Abraham and Sarah's own bodies, even in their old age--yet another "sign" that God was up to something remarkable. In reply to this promise,: "...Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Genesis 17:17). And, if we dare to push the historical maker back even further, we arrive in the Garden of Eden and overhear Yahweh saying: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15), the first proclamation of the Gospel (the protoevangelium) about the coming "offspring" who would finally defeat the Enemy of God.

The Shoulders of the King

Once more, the Hebrew text:

\textit{Wattehî Hamishrāh 'al-shikemō}

Literally, "and the dominion (or rule) shall be on his shoulder." Some scholars think this may indicate a special "mark" found on the vestments of the king who sits on David's throne, much like the crown placed on his head. It might actually reference the crown itself which weighs down "his head" on his shoulders. Of course, the crown or mark are but symbols of the special authority which Yahweh gives His kingly-Son.

In the later prophecy of Daniel, a vision of "the Son of Man" appears to the prophet, along with these words:

\begin{quote}
And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:14; see wider context of Daniel 7).
\end{quote}

We have similar language in the New Testament account of Jesus' baptism when the heavenly voice is heard, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased..." (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), a proclamation also repeated when Jesus is on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7) and to which is added the words "listen to him". God, by declaring Jesus His Son in this way, places the "authority" squarely on his shoulders as His King, much as we saw in Psalm 2, "You are my Son..." as part of the enthronement ritual of Israel's kings. Jesus does not take on Himself the honor of kingship, but submits to His Father's will and purpose, even as he enters the waters of baptism "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).
Throughout his public ministry, the words and actions of Jesus were repeatedly characterized as performed "with authority":

He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes (Matthew 7:29)
But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins— he then said to the paralytic— "Rise, pick up your bed and go home." When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men (Matthew 9:6-8).

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction (Matthew 10:1).

Jesus would underscore his "authority" after his resurrection with the words, "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me..." (Matthew 28:19), followed by his commission to the apostles to make disciples.

Paul's letters reiterate the authority of Jesus when they announce his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God after his death on the cross, as illustrated by passages like this one:

He worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

The extent of Jesus' authority is affirmed by the words of Revelation:

They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Revelation 17:14).

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16).

The "shoulders" on which such authority rests are no ordinary shoulders. Even righteous Hezekiah could not sustain the kingdom for longer than his own lifetime, and even near his death, he disclosed his own flaws as Israel's illustrious king (see above). Only the One sent by God, bearing God's nature, humbled in his humanity but empowered by God's Spirit, could accept the rule which rested on him. To this one, God "gave the name above every name" before whom all would one day bow in worship (Philippians 2:5-11).

The Names of the Son

The grammatical construction of the sentence which begins "his name shall be called..." depends on what preceded it in the Hebrew. Because the authority rests on the shoulder of God's kingly Son, a royal proclamation will thunder forth which announces the "names" by which he will be known to all persons. The Hebrew verb qāra' used in this context plainly means "to proclaim", as in a court or royal setting. Our English parallel might be something like, "Hear ye, hear ye, the honorable king of xyz is in session before his humble subjects, King ABC, ruler of the three rivers, champion of the horse and chariot, victor over his enemies at the battle of You-Lose-I-Win...". In this case, God proclaims the enthronement of His Son who has received all authority, and He now details the royal names by which this Son is to be addressed and which best reveal his royal person. The Hebrew uses the singular "his name" (šēmō) to indicate the unity and consistency of these royal appellations. Though he will be "called" many things, they all belong to one holy, majestic and kingly person. Four distinct phrases appear in the Hebrew, each consisting of an adjective and a noun. We consider them below.

Wonderful Counselor (pele’ yāʿēts)

If we had asked Hezekiah who his counselor was, he would have immediately replied, "Isaiah, the prophet, who brings me the word of Yahweh". Insofar as the kingly Son bears the authority of God's Word in all its completeness, he is the "counselor". In the ancient world, such persons often stood beside the king, giving advice, interpreting official documents, offering direction, and guiding the king's judgments. In this case, the promised Messiah needs no counsel but is himself the giver of counsel. As Isaiah would later write:

13 Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? 14 Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? (Isaiah 40:13-14; also, Romans 11:34).
The kingly Son of Yahweh requires no counselor: he is the counselor. Elsewhere in his prophecy, Isaiah would declare:

This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom (Isaiah 28:29).

The word "wonderful" suggests the manner in which his counsel affects those who receive it. His counsel is "full of wonder" or "produces wonder" or "is wondered at". This is precisely what the audiences of Jesus said about him after hearing his words, both as a "child" and later as an adult:

46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Luke 2:46-47).

And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22).

Mighty God ('el gibōr)

If we retain the translation of this phrase in popular versions of the Bible (NIV, ESV, KJV, NLT), it reads "Mighty God". The Hebrew could be handled differently: "God-Warrior", "Mighty Warrior", "God Mighty", and "Mighty Hero". The crux is on the form 'el which is an abbreviated form of the word for God: 'elōhîm. Due to the poetic constraints, the writer may have chosen the shortened form but still intended the word to mean "God". We have other examples of compounds in Hebrew with 'el, followed by an adjective, such as 'el-shaddai, "God Almighty". Since 'el appears in the initial position, we are inclined to see it as a hyphenated form, "God-Warrior". The word gibōr has a military connotation, in this case, and, considering the highly militarized atmosphere of Isaiah's times, would best fit the context.

Not only were kings expected to be "wise", they were also counted on to lead their armies into battle, conquering the enemy and protecting the homeland. Throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh commonly took the lead as head of His people's armies, fighting Israel's battles, and achieving victory against their foes (see Exodus 14:14; Deuteronomy 1:30; 20:4). In fact, Hezekiah used these very words to describe what Yahweh would do for his besieged people:

With him (the Assyrian king Sennacherib) is an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God, to help us and to fight our battles. And the people took confidence from the words of Hezekiah king of Judah (2 Chronicles 32:8).

The coming Messiah, God's Son and King, is a "divine warrior". He comes to do battle with the real enemies of His people, sin and death, and promises to defeat them (see 1 Corinthians 15:25-26, 54-56). As Paul further wrote about Jesus' death and resurrection that through them …

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (Colossians 2:15).

As a consequence, he further wrote,

...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).

But, we are not left alone, for Jesus, the divine warrior,

...gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57).

So that,

in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37).

The divine warrior-King, Jesus Christ, makes it possible for us to not wage…

...war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

And, at the end of the day's battle, we can confidently say:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Father Forever ('ābî ‘ād)

The noun form for "father" is compounded with a word for time. This is usually rendered, "Everlasting Father". It's probably more accurate to translate it "father forever" or perhaps, "father of forever". The imagery of God as Father reminds us that God is the Creator of all things. His purpose was to produce a world that would
reflect His own glory and one that would last forever. Of course, the intrusion of sin and death altered those plans temporarily, as history bears witness. Creation "groans and travails" with the pain of its captivity ever since the first human pair failed to follow the Father's instructions, and, like disobedient children, chose their own way (see Genesis 3, especially regarding the effect of sin on creation). God called Abraham and formed the nation of Israel from his descendents. To them he became a Father, and they his children:

But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand (Isaiah 64:8).

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men (2 Samuel 7:14).

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? (Malachi 2:10).

But perhaps the most powerful imagery of father and children, applied to God, appears in the story of the Exodus, when God brought his children from the land of slavery into freedom at last:

22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me" (Exodus 4:22-23).

9 But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. 10 "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. 11 Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions (Deuteronomy 32:9-11).

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).

16 For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name (Isaiah 63:16).

At this point in our study we need to correct a misperception often left by some who think that the Old Testament never spoke of God in terms of "father", but that this was a new revelation made for the first time when Jesus referred to God as "father". As the texts above show, Israel knew full well that God was their father, and they His beloved children. That being said, we must also point out that the idea of God as "father" underwent a serious decline during the days leading up to the Advent of Jesus. God became distant and remote, and in His place those who claimed to speak for Him placed caricatures of Him--parodies of His true character. Whereas the Old Testament taught that God was active in the work of Creation and salvation, forming His people, caring for them, rescuing them, and multiplying them in the world, the picture which emerges at the time of Jesus was more that of the absentee landlord who had simply gone away and there questions about when He would return again. A number of Jesus' parables (riddles with surprising endings) incorporate that theme.

What the Advent of Jesus proclaimed, in no uncertain terms, was that the Creator-Father God, Yahweh, had at last returned to His people and was making Himself known in fresh new ways by sending His Son into the world. What Jesus brought to Israel was not the idea of God as Father, which they already had, but the living, vital and renewed experience of God as Father. No, Jesus was telling his fellow Jews, "God has not abandoned you. You are not orphans, left alone on the landscape of human history. God has come home at last, and God is showing Himself to be your Father once more by giving to you His firstborn Son--me!" The idea that Jesus bears the name "Father Forever" does not mean he is the Father in the Trinitarian sense. Rather, it means he reveals God as Father in the Exodus-sense when He came and rescued His children from their slavery in Egypt. In Jesus, God is back home, calling His children home, and doing so through the words and deeds of His firstborn Son, Jesus the Messiah, Savior and Lord.

In bearing the name, "Father Forever", Jesus offers a lasting vision of what God the Father is actual like. The Gospel of John records a powerful exchange between Jesus and Philip on this very question:

7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." 8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (John 14:7-9).

And can we soon forget the moving Parable of the Lost Son which depicts God as the father who, although he had been "used" by his youngest son, is still the first to greet him with open arms, declaring, "My son was lost but now is found" (see Luke 15:11-32). "Look", Jesus is saying to his followers, "the way this father treated his
undeserving son is the way God has always treated you." Perhaps this is why the name "Father Forever" is pertinent to these other passages: God has never ceased to be our Father, even though we have left home and served Him poorly. He ever remains willing to receive back again His lost Creation no matter how far they have wandered or ill-served His name. Put simply, "He is our Father still!--Father Forever.

With Jesus, the work of the New Creation has begun afresh. God is in the creation business again, remaking the spoiled Creation, putting the wrong things right, and inviting human beings to become once more "children of God". In his resurrection from the dead, Jesus was publicly vindicated as "God's Son with power" (Romans 1:3-4), the sure sign that the work of God's creation had resumed in this, "the firstborn of all creation":

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

The resurrected Jesus is God's living witness that He, the Creator God, once more is the Father Forever.

With confidence, then, Jesus could invite his followers to pray: "Our Father in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9), and warmly remind them:

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:8).
Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26).
If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:13).

Moreover, Jesus showed his followers what it meant to be completely surrendered to the purposes of his Father when he prayed in Gethsemane:

..."My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done (Matthew 26:42).

Such a relationship with God as Father impacted the way his followers were to live their lives:

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36).

Prince of Peace (sar shalom)
The word translated "prince" in Hebrew refers to a person of rank and dignity. It may also designate a benefactor or one who endows another with a blessing. We are not required to read "prince" in its narrower sense, that he is somehow an inferior within the government of a king. The emphasis is on the "bringing of peace" or the "administering of peace". The Messiah Jesus is authorized to represent God's interests within His kingdom, and among these is the securing of shalom for His people.

The word translated "peace" is really shalom a much more inclusive expression. As a simple greeting between two persons, it expresses the desire for "wholeness", "health", and "well-being". If something has been broken, the desire is that it will be repaired; if something is lost, that it will be found; if a child is sick, he will be well; a relationship fractured, that it will be restored; if a battle is raging, it will be won. All of these conditions require a special form of justice in which the wrong is made right. To seek shalom for anything or anyone is to desire wholeness and well-being for them.

When Isaiah penned these words, the people of God were at war with her enemies. Without question, the coming "bringer of peace" would mean triumph for the cause of God. But it was not limited to this narrower military figure. As it turned out, Israel, by the time of Jesus' Advent, had placed far too much emphasis on the military defeat of their enemies (Rome and the pagans), and too little on the restoration of Israel's lost and suffering multitudes (tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes and other "sinners"). God's people had developed the false idea that victory for them at the expense of others was the true meaning of shalom. But that was not the case at all. Instead, God would not rest until all his lost sheep were found and the world was "put to rights". For this purpose the "prince of shalom" came into the world. Consider the words of the angels to the shepherds:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14).
The "glory of God" would not be finally achieved until shalom prevailed among God's people. And for that reason Messiah Jesus made his Advent into the world.

The world, at Jesus' coming, was full of "false peace", much as the prophets had warned in the Old Testament:

They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11; Ezekiel 13:10, 16)."

This was true for Israel who had brokered a compromised peace with Rome, trading power for money and special privilege. King Herod was a master at this, as the historian Josephus bears witness. But Rome itself was a false purveyor of peace. Peace meant order and the suppression of all forms of dissent within its borders. The far flung military might of the Empire was used to keep the conquered peoples "in line". The Jewish people were an occupied nation, thanks to Rome. Nothing was truly their own but bartered for the miserable peace Rome offered.

By contrast, Jesus came to offer a different sort of "peace", a shalom that came from God Himself:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid (John 14:27).

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

To these encouraging words, we add those of Paul for whom Jesus the Messiah bridged the awful and deadly space between divisions of the human race, not the least, that between Jew and Gentile. High was the wall which shut out the world from the blessings of God within Second Temple Judaism. Paul once lived within the walls and threw stones at the pagans or at anyone else who would give ground by allowing them access to the holy things of Israel. But the Advent of Jesus invaded Paul's life and turned him around. He left the walls behind and spread the Good News "of the Gospel of Peace" to the whole world. A summary of his understanding appears in this text from Ephesians:

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:14-18).

The Permanence of the Kingdom: “Everlasting Light”

Isaiah now speaks about the "increase" of the Son's rule and his shalom. The prophet uses the Hebrew word lemarebêh which refers to the "abundance" of something. The implication is that the Son's Advent is like seed planted in the earth, awaiting a coming harvest. He has already used that imagery in 9:3 where he spoke about "enlarging the nation and increasing its joy", language which parallels Isaiah's use of "increase" in 9:7. When God's Son arrives to do and be what his names promise, his Advent is the initial stage of a process which will grow and increase through time until his rule and his shalom at last fill the earth. This is consistent with the New Testament teaching that Messiah comes as the firstfruits of God's kingdom, but the harvest awaits his return at the end of time. However, in the meantime, his kingdom takes root and develops in this world. The work of rule and restoration (shalom) continues unabated from the time of his first coming until he comes again. What happens "between the times" matters to God for it is part of His kingdom program. The idea that our only purpose is to "get saved, die and go to heaven" is conceptually far removed from the picture we find both in the Gospels and letters of the New Testament.

According to 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus are the climactic events of his first Advent, but that from then until now Jesus is reigning in heaven:

22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put
all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:22-28).

But what does that mean for us who await the fulfillment of this kingdom in this world? Paul has a word for us as well in the same context:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

If Christ's rule and restoration program is "increasing" throughout human history, and does so unabated (the meaning of Isaiah's phrase, "without end", 9:7), then our work performed in the interests of that program will "always abound…not be in vain". The abundance of Christ's kingdom work will also become ours.

What Christ began at his first Advent persists into the future. During the present time of his heavenly "session" in heaven, his work is, according to Isaiah, to "establish and uphold" that kingdom with "justice and righteousness". That means that the process of "putting the world to rights" continues in our own time, or, to use Isaiah's own words, "from that time on and forever" (9:7). By virtue of Jesus' death and resurrection, followed by ascension to God's right hand, the kingdom of God has been restored once more and is moving toward its grand climax at the "coming" of the Lord. As citizens of that kingdom, we are God's earthly ambassadors, calling the broken and discordant Creation back into relationship with God. Again, we hear from Paul:

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Our lives, Paul urges in 5:21, are the embodiment of God's ability to restore a fractured world by His righteousness, righting the wrongs and bringing shalom to His fallen world. God is, says Paul, doing this "in Christ" and has chosen us as his representatives in announcing that work to the world. It is plain that we co-workers with God in the restorative task of the new creation. However, we cannot reproduce what Christ has already achieved by his cross and resurrection. That is entirely the work of God, or, as Isaiah puts it in his closing sentence, "The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this" (9:7). What God has entrusted to us is the implementation of the details through our own work, done for Him, in the midst of a suffering and fallen world, where our ministry of the Gospel becomes healing and restoration.

A few words about the "zeal" mentioned in 9:7. The word in the Hebrew is a familiar and commonly used expression, qin’ath, and has several shades of meaning: "ardor, jealousy, ardent love, rivalry, zeal". Common to these ideas is a strong unyielding passion which fends off all opponents in its effort to reach a goal or possess an object. A husband's jealousy presses forward to restore his wife's affection. A sportsman jostles his competition to win the prize. A soldier fights off assailants to capture the city. A holy man refuses to compromise his belief and aggressively proclaims it to others. "Zeal" is a marked determination to achieve something without giving up. It is contention to the nth degree in pursuit of that which it loves most deeply. Not all zeal is commendatory, especially if it lacks understanding (see Paul's assessment in Romans 10:2). But enlightened zeal, driven by the desire for the best, is the energy which fuels the fire of needed change. Yahweh's zeal is driven by His holy nature and steadfast love for the world He has made.

The Lord Reigns

Psalm 96:1 Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. 3 Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. 4 For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. 6 Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. 9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. 10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. 11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; 12 let the
fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; 13 they will sing before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.

Words like “sing, praise, proclaim, declare, ascribe, worship, bring an offering, come, and be jubilant” anchor the action of this psalm. They essentially say the same thing: “Get the message out!” Strikingly, the message must go out “among the nations” and not only to the chosen people of God. The world must know what God has done. Light shines on all it reaches with diffuse, spreading, radiating energy. The psalmist introduces the words “splendor” and “majesty” to communicate this theme of God’s light in the world. These are royal words, and they speak of God as the King whose “glory” radiates throughout his kingdom. The Hebrew word hôd, “splendor,” refers to the light and glory God wears as a king, and thus are His vestments — His royal robes. God is clothed in light (see Psalm 104:2). Applied to God’s Son, Jesus clothed himself with human nature and thereby hid his divine glory from ordinary view. Thus, the light of Jesus is the partially hidden light, veiled by human flesh and blood but bursting forth through the words he speaks and the miracles he performs. Paradoxically we might say that by becoming a human being, Jesus clothed himself with our nature so that he might thereby reveal God’s glory.

The light of Jesus reveals the character of God. Consider these instances cited by the poet in this psalm:

3. Ruler of the world (96:10a).
4. Fair Judge (96:10b).
5. Righteousness and Truth are the standards of His rule (96:13).

As we have noted in other studies, the idea of “judge” and “judgment” do not only mean punishment; they pertain also to the proper sorting out of things by a righteous ruler. Kings had enormous responsibility as adjudicators of legal cases. They were the Supreme Court of ancient Israel, and all final appeals rested with their decisions. That is why so much emphasis falls on the righteousness and truthfulness of kings, since those qualities were required to equitably handle the application of law to human situations.

Jesus comes as the holy, righteous, truthful ruler of God’s world. He comes “to judge the earth.” Or, as some scholars explain it, he comes to “put the world to rights” — to make things right and deal with the wrongs. Scripture tells us that “all judgment” has been given to Jesus by God so that all human beings might “honor the Son even as they honor the Father” (see John 5:22). When the psalm tells us “Yahweh reigns,” it is also affirming the New Testament’s claim that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” and that in Jesus, God’s Son, the kingdom has in fact arrived. Light has finally broken forth in the reigning darkness of a sinful world, and this light is here to stay!

The purpose of this psalm — as with many psalms — is to call people to worship and then to supply them with words for worshipping. Heaven, earth, the nations, and of course God’s people are all invited to “sing, be glad, and worship” Him. Through Jesus and his incarnation, the whole world may now properly worship God and celebrate His righteous rule through all His creation. No creature is omitted in this invitation: sea, fields, and trees are numbered among the celebrants! For us, Christmas means that light has finally shone forth in the darkness of the world, and the splendor of God’s kingdom becomes the song of all creation. We recall the words of the carol: “Let heaven and nature sing…” Just as natural light permeates the cosmos across the unfathomable eons of time, so the everlasting light of God’s Son become flesh fills the world with its glory and splendor. In the person of Jesus shines the human face of God.

**Grace Has Appeared**

**Titus 2:11-14** For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope— the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.
In our reading from the epistle, we encounter a synonym for light. It is the word “appear” along with its various forms: “appeared” and “appearing.” The Greek word underlying these terms is *epiphainō* which means “appear, give light, be revealed.” Our English term “epiphany” is derived from this root. We normally celebrate Epiphany on January 6th, the traditional feast of the Magi’s visit to the Christ child. However, it is difficult to isolate the *appearing* of Jesus to a single day, and so we invoke the light imagery suggested by *epiphaneia* (the noun form).

What has appeared? Paul tells us that “the grace of God” has appeared. He is not saying that human beings never experienced God’s grace before the coming of Jesus, however. The Old Testament is filled with uncontested cases of God’s grace to people, both Hebrew and pagan. It is said of Noah that “he found grace in the eyes of Yahweh” (Genesis 6:8). The Hebrew word here is *hēn* and has to do with the “favor” and “acceptance” of God toward His creation. Initiative lies with God not with human beings in showing this favor, in extending this grace. When people failed in their faithfulness to God, He showed them his grace through forgiveness and acts of covenant love. So in what sense is Paul using the word “appears” when applied to *grace* in this text?

Two phrases follow his assertion: “brings salvation” and “to all men.” The first emphasizes the unparallel rescue which this appearance achieves. The word “salvation” literally means “to rescue” from danger, disaster, or death. Humanity was at risk and required the direct intervention of God to forestall ultimate destruction. Nothing human beings had tried succeeded in snatching them from certain doom. Though the Roman Emperor had the reputation for being the *Sōtēr* — the Savior — of his citizens, the Empire faced an uncertain future. Though Second Temple Judaism tried to offer a way out of Israel’s failing life, the people of God remained in exile from the promised blessings of the covenant. Something needed to be done — and soon. The coming of Jesus as a human being meant the “appearing of salvation.” He is the “Savior” as his name, Jesus, clearly declares. The Hebrew word *Yēšūa*’ literally means, “Yahweh saves.” Thus, when Paul says “the grace of God that brings salvation,” he is actually saying, “Jesus!”

The second phrase, “to all men,” reveals the *universal* scope of the grace which has appeared in Jesus’ birth. The New Testament consistently proclaims that “whosoever will” may receive this grace and the salvation which it brings (John 3:16). God’s choice of a covenant people does not exclude some individuals and include others. Choice is a two-fold transaction: *God chooses the whole world, but persons in the world must choose to be chosen.* God does not want to lose any of His created human children, but wants them all to respond to His choice of them (see 2 Peter 3:9). That’s what makes “grace so amazing” — and so brilliantly clear with the everlasting light of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

When light shines the grace of God into people’s lives, real change happens — or should. Such grace is a moral teacher: “It teaches us to say ‘No’” to the temptations of sin and also to say “Yes” to the lives which look like the character of God as it shines from the life of Jesus Christ. The everlasting light is also this ethical impetus to live for God and to reflect the glory of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:6). Grace is not only the *favor* of God it is also the *power* of God to become transformed human beings.

Paul does not stop with the appearance of Jesus the first time. He does what the Church has done for centuries during Advent and Christmas: combine the first and second comings of Jesus Christ in one grand celebratory act. Just as the grace of God made visible in the first coming impacts our conduct, so also the future “blessed hope and glorious appearing of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” impacts us as well. Waiting for the Second Coming means looking forward for the dawning of the new day when the creation is restored and we are raised to resurrection life.

We live retrospectively in light of God’s grace at Christ’s first coming; we live prospectively in light of God’s glory at Christ’s second coming. Remember, we are talking about the *everlasting light* which has a past,
present, and future. Just as natural light streams through the cosmos for unimaginable periods of time, so the light of God fills time and space with grace and glory unending, and from history to eternity.

**Good News Brings Great Joy**

**Luke 2:1-14** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.\(^2\) (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)\(^3\) And everyone went to his own town to register.\(^4\) So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.\(^5\) He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.\(^6\) While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,\(^7\) and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.\(^8\) And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.\(^9\) An angel of the Lord appeared to 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. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.\(^11\) Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.\(^12\) This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."\(^13\) Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, \(^14\) "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

The Gospel reading gives us a serious look at the events on the ground at the time of Jesus’ birth. When the Bible tells us about the coming of Jesus, it places the event within the context of world history. Rome was the superpower, and Luke’s nativity narrative begins with geopolitical details.

1. The human glory of empire confronts the reader in 2:1-3. Census means, not community, but control. To require the enrollment of “the entire Roman world” and to ensure its enforcement were prerogatives of Empire. Historians disagree about the timing of the census which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, but not about its occurrence sometime near the beginning of the first century. The birth of Jesus happened in this context. The glory of Jesus collided with the glory of Empire.

2. All residents of Rome’s empire return to their towns of origin. They go, not for sake of kin or neighbors, but because of overwhelming coercive power. In this we see not the catholicity of neighbor but of Empire instead.

3. Rome dealt with the *populi*: the people in large units, not with the individual. Imperial anonymity, attached to superior force, was all that mattered. Take the census, collect the taxes, and maintain order — these were the priorities. Luke, on the other hand, commences his story with the words, “So Joseph also went up from the town of …” The biblical story takes keen interest in the *individual* and his *family*: where he comes from and where he is going — Nazareth in Galilee; Bethlehem in Judea.

4. “..with Mary…” The pledge of Jewish marriage keeps two human beings together in miniature community through this otherwise Imperial ordeal. Together, the couple bears an inconvenient truth, for Mary carries a child conceived in the most irregular way.

5. When families traveled in such ways in Israel, they normally did so for reunions or sacred feasts, and the joy of the journey was realized in a festive arrival. In the present case, crowds went home to register, when they would have preferred going home to celebrate. We observe, then, the anonymity of Empire and its ill-attention to real human situations.

6. “While they were there…” These words show the circumstantial nature of the couples’ presence in Bethlehem. Caesar had no idea these particular people had come to their ancestral home to register for his census. He didn’t care about *them*, he only cared about *why* they had come. However, the Bible pays close attention to all the details. A baby boy, Mary’s firstborn, begins life in this place, tenderly wrapped in rough cloth and laid in a feeding trough. “No room,” Luke tells his audience, “in the inn.” All the details matter, since the One who would become the everlasting light took his first breaths in a dingy place. Had other babies been as unfortunate as Jesus that night? Probably. He shared their plight, even as he would later share their suffering and death. Light always begins in the darkness.

Just as light and darkness stand in stark contrast, so the conditions of Jesus’ birthplace are at variance with his true identity. Would we have expected to find him in such humiliation? In his birth, the everlasting light is companion with lowly things. Caesar’s census has no room for special considerations to comfort and
convenience. He doesn’t issue special concessions to allow for accommodations. Rome’s majesty has little in common with God’s everlasting light.

In keeping with things ordinary are the activities of nearby shepherds. Caesar may keep watch over his Empire, but they pay attention to sheep!

1. Tending flocks, along with agriculture, formed the basis of the Palestinian economy, and sheep raised on the hillsides around Bethlehem may well have been destined for temple sacrifices in Jerusalem, only six miles to the north.

2. New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias describes a shepherd’s life:
   "The dryness of the ground made it necessary for the flocks of sheep and cattle to move about during the rainless summer and to stay for months at a time in isolated areas, far from the owner's home. Hence, herding sheep was an independent and responsible job; indeed, in view of the threat of wild beasts and robbers, it could even be dangerous. Sometimes the owner himself (Luke 15:6; John 10:12) or his sons did the job. But usually it was done by hired shepherds, who only too often did not justify the confidence reposed in them (John 10:12-13)."

3. Some of Israel's great heroes were shepherds -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Both Psalm 23 and Jesus compare God's care to that of a Good Shepherd. But in the First Century, it seems, shepherds -- specifically, hireling shepherds -- had a rather unsavory reputation.

4. Jeremias cites Rabbinic sources to the effect that "most of the time they were dishonest and thieving; they led their herds onto other people's land and pilfered the produce of the land." Since they were often months at a time without supervision, they were regularly accused of stealing some of the increase of the flock. Consequently, the pious were warned not to buy wool, milk, or kids from shepherds on the assumption that such items were stolen property. Shepherds were not allowed to hold a judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses. A midrash (that is, a "commentary") on Psalm 23:2 reads, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd." Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher of Alexandria (25 B.C.E. - 45 C.E.), wrote about looking after sheep and goats, "Such pursuits are held mean and inglorious."

5. In contrast to rabbinical contempt for shepherds, however, Jesus distinguishes between the good shepherd and the hireling (John 10:11-13). He tells a parable of the shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep in the fold while searching the hills to find the missing one (Luke 15:3-7). Perhaps this is because Jesus, who has fellowship with the despised and sinners, knows and appreciates them as people. There is no suggestion that the shepherds to whom the angels appeared were not devout men, though they were from a despised class.

6. They lived most of the year outside, away from the townspeople. "Abiding in the field" (KJV) is the Greek verb agrauleo, "live outdoors". Flocks were kept outside in this way from April to November, and, sometimes during the winter in suitable locations. They were constantly with their sheep, since the sheep were vulnerable to all kinds of trouble. "Keeping watch" is a combination of two related Greek words. The verb is phulasso, "to carry out sentinel functions, watch, guard". The noun is phulake, "the act of guarding." Together they carry the idea of "keep watch, do guard duty". The shepherds made sure that the sheep were safe from wandering off and injuring themselves, as well as dangers from thieves and wolves.

Unexpectedly, angels appear to this humble lot. At first, the famous “angel of Yahweh” bursts forth with “the glory of the Lord” which shines around them. Magnificent, everlasting light encircles them in the dead of night while they go about their ordinary task of keep watch over sheep. The text says the glory “shone around them” not merely above them. Here was light that permeated the world of the shepherds, involving them in its brilliance. Only terror could describe what they felt. Angelic words calm their troubled hearts: “Fear not!” Often the biblical audiences sat paralyzed in the presence of the divine, requiring the intervening assurance that God meant them no harm.

The angel announces “Good News,” not bad news to the shepherds. Messengers of Yahweh in the Old Testament often followed their appearances with the familiar words, "Fear not!" The sort of "fear" the Presence of God should inspire is reverential respect and awe, but not terrifying paralysis. After all, Jesus has come as
Immanuel, and that is very good news for Israel. At last, the One who once lived in His glory among them, has returned. "Do not be afraid!" And the reason lies in the messenger's mission: to bring "good news" (Greek: euaggelizomai, from the root words for "good news"). This was no ordinary news. The ancient prophets promised that one day Yahweh's messengers would appear and bring with them a joyous proclamation:

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ((Isaiah 40:9).

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7)

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. 5 Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards (Isaiah 61:1-5).

Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed (Nahum 1:15).

These Old Testament texts weave the familiar themes found in the angel's announcement to the shepherds: good news, shepherds, and the joyous festivals.

Another curious connection lies in the correlation of "good news" and "Caesar Augustus". In an inscription which dates from 9BC, the Roman emperor is honored by an unknown writer with these words:

The providence which has ordered the whole our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere…; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him. (Priene Inscriptions, edited by F. Hiller von Gärtringen, 104, 40)

No coincidence placed the census of Caesar Augustus and the announcement of good news by the angels in the same passage. Luke knew what he was doing by juxtaposing these conflicting understandings of what "good news" actually means. For pagans, good news meant the world ruled by Caesar whom they called "benefactor", "savior", and "god". But for Luke and the angelic messenger, it was quite a different story. God was bringing good news into the world, but it was not the work of Caesar, as the angel will now explain to the shepherds.

"Great joy" (Greek: chara megalen) is coming "to you", the messenger proclaims. Unlike the Empire where only a few privileged persons of power endowed themselves with honor and glory, the good news offered to the shepherds is, in turn, available to all of Israel. Even within Judaism, distinct social classes had formed, marginalizing some while giving privilege to others. As we have already observed, shepherds were not exactly a popular social class. Yet, to persons such as these, God's angel announces the wondrous news about the birth of Jesus.

1. The birth is placed in David's town, Bethlehem. Although Luke does not cite Micah 5:2, he no doubt has it in mind by underscoring the birth of Jesus in "the town of David". From the theological perspective this places Jesus in the town required by the census, but more importantly, connects Jesus to the Davidic family. Additionally, David was a shepherd, called from his father's flocks to shepherd Israel instead. These awestruck observers might have thought, "That makes him one of us." And indeed in his incarnation he was.

2. The one born is described as:
a. **Savior**: The inscription we cited above used this term in reference to Caesar. The Greek *soter* has a range of meanings. Essentially it refers to a "deliverer", "one who saves, preserves, restores", based on the verb form *sozo*. A number of famous Greeks appended this word *soter* to their names, including Demetrius in Syria and Ptolemy in Egypt, because they delivered their citizens from the tyranny of their enemies. From a Jewish perspective, only God is Savior, having delivered His people from slavery and exile (Hebrew: *moshi'ah*, one who causes deliverance). An Old Testament text illustrates this belief: "11 I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior. 12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed-- I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'that I am God. 13 Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?'" (Isaiah 43:11-13). That means Caesar's attribution as Savior fails, along with the earlier claimants to this title. What's striking in Luke's account is that this title now is given to the baby who is born in Bethlehem. In some mysterious way God has become a human being in His role as Savior.

b. **Christ**: This is the more familiar Hebrew word *hamashiah*, "the anointed one", "the Messiah". In Jewish thought, he is the coming one who promises to restore David's kingdom and establish the righteous rule of Yahweh in the world. This connects the "baby" with David's throne, but also with the covenant hope traced back to Abraham's "seed" through whom blessing would come to the whole world. "To anoint" means to choose and empower. Messiah is God's choice, and is empowered by God's Spirit (see Isaiah 11 for a detailed listing of the Spirit-endowed gifts of the "branch", another designation for Messiah).

c. **Lord**: Greek-speaking readers of Luke's Gospel would recognize the word *kurios*, derived from *kuros* which means "supreme power or authority". The Hebrew *Adonai* carries similar meaning. Once we unpack the details, the word implies: he to whom a person or thing belongs, about which he has power of deciding; master, lord the possessor and disposer of a thing the owner; one who has control of the person, the master in the state: the sovereign, prince, chief, a title of honor expressive of respect and reverence, with which servants greet their master. By applying this word to the newborn, Luke makes clear that if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.

d. **"To you"**: As if to completely turn the cosmic order on its head, the angel finally tells the shepherds that this baby who is Savior, Christ and Lord is born to them. He is not born for the benefit of Caesar and his census, but for ordinary keepers of sheep who were doing what they always did: kept watch over their flocks at night. And why not? Does not God choose such persons to silence the mighty aims of tyrants? Does He not turn the world upside down so that His eternal values might prevail?

3. **The sign**: In what sense? Luke combines three distinct "tokens" to assemble the sign, namely, 1) the baby, 2) the clothes, and 3) the manger. By themselves they don't amount to a sign, but combined, they form a prediction, a prophecy made by the angel, so that when the shepherds encountered all three together they would know the truth of what the angel had spoken. The lights would come on!

a. **A baby wrapped in cloths**: By itself, not especially remarkable. Any considerate Jewish mother would have wrapped her newborn in such strips of cloth (Greek: *espargonosen*). The following text reveals (using negative language) the common events in a birth: "On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths" (Ezekiel 16:4). So what makes this so "significant"? Weren't all babies treated this way at birth? Exactly. What Luke wants to communicate to the reader is that the newborn Jesus is born just like every other ordinary child as signified by the ordinary wrappings used by Mary to swaddle him. But this ordinary fact places the next element of the "sign" into greater relief and deeper contrast.

b. **A baby lying in a manger**: Finding a child lying in a manger is, on the other hand, not ordinary, nor is it expected. The Greek word *phatne* properly describes the ledge or projection in the end of the room used as a stall on which the hay or other food of the animals of travelers was placed. Three Old Testament passages use the word "manger": "Will the wild ox consent to serve you?
Will he stay by your manger at night?" (Job 39:9). "Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty, but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest" (Proverbs 14:4). "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:3). Mangers are associated with the feeding of livestock. Shepherds would have been familiar with manger feeding when grazing land diminished at certain seasons of the year. For the angel to include the manger as part of the "sign" connected the shepherds to Jesus in a humble and ordinary way. "He's our little sheep", they might have thought, "part of our flock".

Bolstered by this "sign", the shepherds had in hand the confirmation they would need that the angel's words were true. The marvelous swaddled in the ordinary: baby, diapers and a manger.

But before we leave the topic of shepherds, we ought to consider the familiar pastoral themes found throughout Scripture. We note a few key points in this regard:

- Yahweh's warning to Israel's shepherds (Ezekiel 34; Jeremiah 10:21; 23:1; )
- Israel in the wilderness: "shepherds for forty years" (Numbers 14:33)
- David shepherded Israel "with integrity of heart" (Psalms 78:72)
- Yahweh promised to give Israel "shepherds after my own heart" (Jeremiah 3:15)
  14 "Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. 15Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.
- Jesus saw Israel as "sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)
- Jesus called himself the "good shepherd" (John 10)

At last the heavens are thrown open and the shepherds hear from God's "heavenly host". What is a host? Simply, it is an "army". When the Old Testament spoke of the "Yahweh of hosts", it meant Yahweh and His heavenly armies. Appropriately, as Yahweh's royal son enters human history, the angel armies attend his way, and through music serenade his arrival. Their poem is elegant, yet simple:

1. **Glory to God in the highest**: God is the highest, not Caesar, Luke seems to be telling us. He is the one deserving of credit, worthy of glory. "Glory" in Hebrew is *kabod* and means "worth, weight, dignity". The idea of "heavy" is embedded in it. God is worth His weight, we might say, and so He is glorious. Such language also points to "majesty". The Greek *doxa* points to the blinding brightness of the sun. The arrival of God's son in the world is the unveiling of His majesty, but it is a heavenly glory he reveals, not an earthly one. "Don't look for glory on earth," the angels seems to be telling their audience, "not from the baby in diapers lying in the manger". But that ordinary little baby conceals the heavenly glory which, one day, will be revealed.

2. **On earth peace to those on whom His favor rests**: But earth is where he comes. Earth has become his home. It's not a very hospitable place. Shepherds knew that first-hand. The distance between shepherds and Caesar was great. Even more divisive were the several classes which separated ordinary people from their leaders. But more significantly was the distance between God and human beings. That's why the angelic song is so encouraging. On earth, peace has come and human beings have become the precious objects of God's "favor", that is, his grace. A sovereign is in a position to bestow favor by virtue of his eminence. In this case, God in heaven above, full of glory and light, chooses to endow His earthly subjects with gracious favor and with peace. Roman citizens knew all about *Pax Augustus* and *Pax Romana*. Through efficient and often brutal administration, Rome welded together an Empire, cobbled from the variety of ethnic groups living in the diverse provinces around the Mediterranean. Conformity to the Roman will and freedom from revolt: these were the values of Caesar's world. But the peace, *shalom*, brought by the newborn, flowed from God's gracious love for the world. As the shepherds witness this heavenly chorus, they are invited by its very words to experience the favor resting on them.

What follows in Luke's account is a *mission to confirm the message*, followed by a *mission to communicate the message*. 

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1. "Let us go to see what the Lord has made known to us". These are the words of faithful shepherds. What they heard became their sacred trust, and deserved to be confirmed. Nothing in the text informs us how they "found" the newborn Jesus. Perhaps there was something in the three-fold sign that guided them. Unlike the Magi who "followed the star", the shepherds "followed the word" made known to them "by the Lord". These were Jewish shepherds, familiar with Torah, and open to the living word spoken by Yahweh's angel. Yahweh desired that such shepherds lead His people. As the prophets foretold (see the "shepherd" texts above), Yahweh would raise up new shepherds to replace the unfaithful leaders of His people. By saying "let us go", these shepherd-witnesses fulfill Yahweh's desire for all His people.

2. "Hurried, found, seen, spread the word, returned, glorified, praising God". Luke strings together these verbs of positive response. The shepherds are eager to find the "Savior who is Christ the Lord". Once they find him, they become genuine missionaries, spreading the word, while returning to their flocks filled with praise and glory for God. It is not difficult to see how God had already begun to gather a renewed Israel around Jesus, even in his infancy. On their way home to their flocks, they "preach the good news", and create a stir of amazement. No doubt the rough and crude manner of the normal shepherd did not match the eloquence of their words or the power of their delivery. Not far in the future others would join their number: simple fisherman, despised tax collectors, and unrefined human beings. From such persons God determined to make a home for His people. They became fresh new rays of His Everlasting Light.

Conclusion
In the familiar words of “Silent Night,” we hear “All is calm all is bright…glories stream from heaven afar…Son of God, love’s pure light, radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace.” Such language of glorious light saturates the hymnody of this season. We close this series with a few notable excerpts:

- “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”: “…drive away the shades of night and pierce the clouds and brings us light…”
- “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child”: “…heaven’s star shone brightly froth, Glory all around Him…all the plains were lit that night…”
- “The First Noel”: “…a star shining in the east…gave great light…continued both day and night…”
- “Angels from the Realms of Glory”: “…yonder shines the infant Light…”
- “As With Gladness Men of Old”: “…guiding star…hailed its light, leading onward beaming bright…”
- “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks”: “…the angel of the Lord came down and glory shone around…”

In keeping with this week’s study, however, we are especially drawn to the familiar words, “…Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The birth of Jesus pierced the darkness and gave to this light its everlastingness.

Glory to God! Amen.