

**“Longing For Light” based on Luke 2:1-20**  
**Preached by Rev. Jonathan New**  
**First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT**  
**Christmas Eve — December 24, 2011**

“I am sorry to have to introduce the subject of Christmas.” So wrote George Bernard Shaw, who went on to explain: “It is an indecent subject; a gluttonous, wasteful, wicked, lying, filthy, blasphemous, demoralizing subject. Christmas is forced on a reluctant nation by shopkeepers and the press; on its own merits it would wither and shrivel in the fiery breath of universal hatred; and anyone who looked back to it would be turned into a pillar of greasy sausages.” Indecent? Wicked? Blasphemous? Christmas? While I wouldn’t go that far, Shaw is right to criticize Christmas commercialism, what its become in our age of consumption.

But is he right that, on its own merits, Christmas would wither and shrivel? Year after year, something — aside from Santa and Jingle Bells — attracts us. Well, I find one of the most compelling aspects of the Christmas story is its stark contrasts: The powerful emperor and the vulnerable baby; the kings’ wealth and the holy family’s poverty; the warm, full inn; the cold, sparse stable; the dark night and the bright light.

My earliest Christmas memories, beyond excitement over presents, are of light: moonlight on snow, sparkling Christmas trees, colored lights along the streets, glowing Advent wreaths, and candlelight services like this one. Indeed, in the bleak midwinter, on one of the shortest days of the year, comes this day celebrating light. With the exception of life and death, there may be no more powerful contrasting images than light and dark. We are traders in such symbols, for they speak beyond themselves about mysteries too deep for words, and they set our imaginations free. The gospel writers, too, relied on symbols. For when Luke spoke of the shepherds and their night of light he spoke to the depths of the human soul.

No one in this story understands the contrast between light and dark better than the watchful, nameless shepherds. Think of them. Huddling together to fight off the night chill. Trying to stay awake. On alert for any of the many dangers darkness may hold. Night after night, year after year, they lived that life of darkness. And there they sat, on a night like any other, until with startling swiftness a piercing light shattered their universe. A divine spotlight shone on these nobodies, and, suddenly propelled to center stage, though trembling with fear, they received joyful news of a bright future for the world.

The old, familiar carol we sang earlier speaks of such darkness and such light. “O little town of Bethlehem! / How still we see thee lie; / Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by; / Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting Light; / The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight.” When the shepherds set out for Bethlehem that night, they went bearing their fears and their hopes. They went, accustomed to years of darkness, yet excited by the promise of peace, for the angel had told them: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” Peace. The everlasting light of peace. Warmth, sight, and understanding. With old fears and a new hope, the shepherds go to Bethlehem... and find peace.

Isn’t that why we’re here tonight? Sure, Shaw is right about what Christmas can be. But Christmas can also be about our darkness illuminated by hope and our own longing for light

fulfilled, for it can be as true for us as it was for the shepherds, as Isaiah proclaimed: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined.” One thousand years later, we live in a time of uncertainty, filled with hopes and fears. Like the shepherds, we too live on alert for danger from the dark. Yet, through the story of Christmas, we yearn for peace and to affirm with John, that “light shines in the darkness and darkness did not overcome it.”

This is a story about all creation moving from darkness into light. George Lucas tells a similar story in *Star Wars*. Likewise, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. So, too, did Charles Dickens, when he began his tale about Ebenezer Scrooge on a cold, foggy, evening — symbolic of the dark night of Scrooge’s life — that finally gives way to the brilliance of morning — a Christmas morning. Dickens writes: “Running to the window, he opened it, and put out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial; Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious. Glorious!” Finally, Ebenezer’s dark and squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching life gives way to light and peace.

Christmas isn’t only what modern America has made it. Stripped of its baubles, flashing lights, and plastic reindeer, Christmas has a glowing ember which alone can fuel its celebration. At its core is a warm and shining light that draws people of good will. In one way or another, most of us long for light in our lives; we carry our hopes and fears; and we desire peace. Like the shepherds, we, too, have been invited to Bethlehem to know the Prince of Peace, Immanuel, God-with-us. However we may get there — led by tinsel or blinking lights, fueled by roast turkey or fruitcake, by way of Frank Capra’s 34th Street or Bedford Falls, carried on the Polar Express or Santa’s sleigh — let us set out on the journey. And may it be said of us, as of Scrooge ever after his long dark night, that we know how to keep Christmas well. For if we do, our hope and the light of Christ can together kindle peace for all the earth.