

Christmas Eve (a Saturday), 2016
Darkness and Light in the Advent

A family talk by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-3, Luke 2:1-16
Matthew 2:1-12
Arcana Caelestia #4180:5

You all know the story of the Lord's birth, right? - How the angel appeared to Mary, and then again to Joseph to explain what would happen; how the Lord was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger; how the shepherds were told the good news by a whole army of angels, and how the wise men followed a special star to find the baby. It's all quite wonderful and remarkable.

But remember, there's a dark side to this story, too! After all, the baby Lord was laid in a manger "because there was no room for them in the inn." We also read that Herod "and all Jerusalem with him" was *troubled* at the news of the Lord's birth and almost immediately began to consider how they could kill Him!

But this is exactly what the prophets had said for centuries before His birth. You heard some of that in the first lesson where it said, "Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people..." That darkness was a complete lack of understanding, a complete **inability to see** what was true and good in the world at that time. For example, people really thought that the best way to honor God was to kill animals and cut them apart and burn them to please Him. And they thought it was perfectly alright to be mean to other people, as long as they were not their friends or relatives, members of their own group. In fact they really believed that God wants people to "get even," and get revenge when someone does something hurtful to them – not realizing that this just makes things *worse*.

They had no idea that the best way to worship God actually is to take good care of all the things He has created for us, and to avoid doing anything harmful at all – or as we say in the New Church, to shun evils as sins against Him, to keep from doing or even thinking bad things because we know that would disappoint Him. In fact, they had no idea at all about life in heaven or hell, and so they put all their focus on things in this world, not realizing that this whole world is meant to prepare us for eternal life after the body dies.

So this is why the Lord came into the world: to help people – all people, not just the Jews! – learn these truths and have better lives, not just in this world but forever! As Isaiah had said, "Darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; **but the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.**"

The idea here is that the Lord's coming would be like a beautiful **sunrise** bringing new light to the whole world so that people could really see and understand how to live well.

“His glory” is the brightness of that light shining everywhere through the clouds and darkness of people’s confused ideas, especially their confused ideas about the meaning of the stories in the Word, and about the life after death in heaven or hell. This is why the Lord when He grew up actually said that He is the light of the world, and that whoever follows Him will NOT walk in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12).

But the Lord’s work was not done all at once, and certainly not just by being born as a baby. After that He still had to grow up, or as we read, to grow “in wisdom and stature,” and this means that He had to face the darkness of falsity and evil in the world and fight against it so that it wouldn’t hurt Him or us if we follow Him. And again, it is remarkable how the Lord began to do this even as a newborn baby, making sure there WAS a safe place for Mary to keep Him and that angels were prepared to encourage Joseph and warn him about how he should hide Him from Herod, not just anywhere but in the one place – Egypt – most famous for education, so He could grow up learning from the very best teachers.

Again, the world was a dangerous place when the Lord was born, and not just because bad or confused people were everywhere trying to control other people for their own worldly advantage, but also – and even more importantly – because evil spirits from hell were making it hard for anyone to think clearly or to avoid coming under their selfish influence. In fact it was not unusual for people to be possessed by evil spirits so that they couldn’t control themselves at all, and the spirits would make them do things that were hurtful to themselves and others.

No one on earth had the wisdom or the power to remove these bad influences and put them in their place. But the Lord had that power because He was the Son of God! He did not have an earthly father; He had a heavenly Father, in fact **THE** heavenly Father, the invisible Creator of the universe. So we read that “the Holy Spirit” came upon Mary and “the power of the Highest” overshadowed her and caused her to have her baby *without a natural man as a father*. In other words the Lord’s Father really was His *own* perfect love coming down into the world to take on a body of flesh and blood, including a brain and a mind that could be attacked by evil spirits (since they couldn’t attack Him or even come close to Him in heaven). That way He could fight back – not by hurting them but by standing up to them, taking away their power, correcting them and applying the truths of the Word to them, while *at the same time showing people on earth how to do the same things* with His help.

This is not to say that the Lord had an easy time of it! When He took on a human body and brain He actually wrapped or covered His infinite love and power in a package of natural *conditions* that limited His understanding – temporarily. You see, He started out as a baby, pretty much like any other baby, and so in the natural part of His mind He had to learn things gradually until He was old enough to really understand, and really put His wisdom to work. Even so, because His inner love was pure and perfect He grew up faster, more fully and more perfectly than any other person (TCR 89), so that, for

example, He amazed the teachers in the Synagogue with His wisdom when He was only 12 years old!

But what was He doing until then? The Word doesn't tell us, but we know that for at least some of that time He was avoiding Herod, and He did so until Herod died! This tells us something VERY important: since even the Lord found it necessary to stay away from danger until He was old enough to handle it, if we are going to follow the Lord we, too, must avoid dangerous situations as much as we can until we are wise enough to keep from getting hurt. For our world today is still full of darkness and confusion, doubts and temptations; the big difference now is that we have the light of the Lord's life to guide us safely through it. And in that light we can all be hopeful, optimistic, brave, cheerful and wise.

To illustrate, let's just look around the room tonight and see how this very worship service can remind us of the Lord's purpose in being born on earth. You know it's dark outside, right? And it would be dark in here, too, if it weren't for all the lights in the ceiling and on all these candles. It was dark in several parts of the story of the Lord's birth, too, but the darkness was brightened up by glory of the Lord that shone around angels who appeared to Zacharias, to Mary, to Joseph and to the shepherds, and also by the bright star that led the wise men to Bethlehem. ALL of these lights, and ALL of this glory is there to remind us of the power of the Lord to give us understanding so that we can live well and stay safe even when the darkness of confusion is all around us. The angels in the story are all messengers from the Lord; in fact the word, angel, means messenger, and the messenger is important mainly because of the message, which is some truth. As for the star the wise men saw, it was a sign that the Lord was born – another truth about Him.

So, remember how Joseph in the darkness of night worried about what to do with Mary before she had her baby? We worry, too, when we don't understand what's going on! But if we are just and thoughtful, like Joseph, the Lord can send messages of truth into our lives, too, encouraging us and teaching us what to do.

Remember how the shepherds kept watch over their flocks by night? Sheep are symbols of innocence, so if we will be careful and keep watch as they did for things that would be harmful to our innocence the Lord can send a whole host of angels to support and encourage us. Although these angels may be invisible to our natural eyes, the messages they bring are now clearly visible to our spiritual eyes in the Word since the Lord has now taught us what it really means.

Remember how the wise men came from the east, following a star? Stars are signs of knowledge and understanding. You don't see stars in the daytime; that's when everything is bright and clear and you take your knowledge for granted; you don't even think about it. But when it is dark and you are confused or can't see what you should be doing, if you will look "up" to the Lord in the heavens, or better yet, "look up" what He

teaches in the Word He will show you what you need to know and guide you through that darkness to the peaceful, beautiful place within your mind where you can see Him as the source of all your love and wisdom, and know that He will guide you through your difficulties if you trust and follow Him.

And now, finally, look again at all the candles in this room. Look around you; look behind you. Every candle can be a reminder of some one person who is letting the Lord's light shine in his or her own life. ONE candle doesn't give a whole lot of light, **but we do not have just one candle in our lives**. We have people all around us who are doing their best to live according to the Lord's Word, despite the darkness that may worry or upset us. These people are just like the angels who came to see Zacharias and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds; they are "there" for you, sent by the Lord Himself to bring messages of comfort, hope and encouragement. Plus, that **one special person** who particularly helps you to find the Lord in your life – that person is like the one really bright star in the night sky that can guide you to the "place" where you will come to see Him for yourself and truly know Him and worship Him in confidence and peace.

Do not take these people for granted. And don't be afraid of them! Sure, they may show you things about yourself that need changing, but they're not perfect, either; only the Lord is perfect. Yet they can encourage you in a good, caring way and shed real light from HIM on your path – just as YOU can for THEM. So as we work together in the practical spirit of His generous presence His kingdom will come and His will can be done, as in the light of heaven, so upon the earth. Amen.

Arcana Caelestia #4180, section 5

"Before the Lord came into the world the Divine itself flowed into the whole of heaven; and because heaven at that time consisted for the most part of those who were celestial, that is, who were governed by the good of love, that influx of God's Almighty power furnished the light which shone in the heavens, and with that light wisdom and intelligence. But when the human race departed from the good of love and charity it was no longer possible for that light to be provided by way of heaven, nor consequently for the wisdom and intelligence to come through to the human race. For this reason, so that the human race might be saved, the Lord out of necessity came into the world and made Divine the Human within Himself in order that as to that Divine Human He might become Divine Light, and in so doing might bring light to the whole of heaven and to the whole world. He had been from eternity Light itself, for the Divine itself passing through the heavens was the source of that Light. And it was the Divine itself which took on the Human and made this Human Divine; and once that Human had been made Divine He was then able to bring light not only to the celestial heaven itself but also to the spiritual heaven, and to the human race too, which received and receives Divine Truth within good, that is, within love to Him and within charity towards the neighbor...."