

CHRISTMAS EVE

Sermon Text: Isaiah 9:2-7

Related Text: Titus 2:11-14

John 1:1-14 (non-Lectionary text)

Note: First Christmas Eve at St. Paul's

Gracious God, you have thrown a lifeline to us in our darkness—a beam of light that shines through Jesus. Fill us with the wonder and joy of his presence in the world and in our hearts. AMEN.

You are at a child's birthday party. There are lots of children gathered around with their parents. Some of these folks you know, some you don't. The only one who seems to know everyone there is the guest of honor.

Of course, one of the highlights of any birthday party is the cake. Candles are lit. People are singing "Happy Birthday"; some are doing so off key. The guest of honor blows out the candles, and two seconds later, the flame comes back.

I love those trick candles. No matter how many times you try to blow them out you are never quite sure if you've been successful, and just when you think you've succeeded, flash, they come to life again.

Such is the power of a small flicker of light. Such is the power of the one who comes to dispel the

darkness of our lives; the things of which we are ashamed, the things we sweep under the carpet or shove in a closet hoping that no one finds out.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world. But he enters the world in a very subdued manner. He comes as one small flicker of light, such as the light of a candle. It hardly seems able to cast much light. A strong gust of the Trauger Hill winds surely would extinguish it.

Not so fast, friends. Each time we think we've gotten away with something, or excuse away our own sins, the candle may appear blown out at the moment, only to flicker back to life illuminating our lives.

Such illumination reveals who we are. Revealed is our hypocrisy. Revealed is our failing to stand up against injustice. Revealed is the judgment upon others that we have cast. Revealed is our greed, our selfish desire to have everything now and on our terms.

What we want is someone to come along and keep this dirt in our lives hidden from our friends, our families, and even ourselves. What we got was a small flicker of light. We received a light that starts

out small and unassuming. There is still enough darkness around.

Yet such a light grows in brightness and warmth. Slowly the darkness gives way, just as the darkness of night gives way to the rising of the morning sun. With the growing of such a light it becomes harder and harder to keep things hidden.

Soon everyone will know just how much we are oppressed by our own faults, failings and sin. The light is beginning to spread, just like it did long ago.

When the prophet Isaiah spoke of a great light shining, he was speaking to a people oppressed by an Assyrian nation. Isaiah spoke to a people weakened, living in despair, longing for hope, experiencing one form of suffering after another, and watching as loved ones were put to death or worse, left to die slowly.

We too are a people who live under the oppression of sin. We who live in darkness, on us the light shines. On us shines the light of Christ.

Many efforts have been made to hide that light. The biggest came at the time of the Passover, when Jesus gathered with his disciples. From that celebration,

Jesus was then handed over to authorities. He was sentenced to death. He was crucified and it seemed as if the darkness won. The candle was blown out. No more flicker.

But this isn't a normal candle. Jesus is the light of the world. What greets us then isn't just a candle. It is the fullness of light that illumines the sky high above the fields on which the shepherds lay. What greets us is Christ, who casts out all the darkness and brings us into his light.

Greeting us with open arms is Christ, ready to receive us, even when we were not ready to receive him. Yet, that is the grace of God. The grace of God is that despite our unworthiness, we are brought into the light of Christ.

In the light of Christ we receive warmth and love. In the light of Christ we receive goodness and mercy. In the light of Christ we too are renewed. We too are the candles that are lit from his love and sent out.

In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism we hear the charge, to let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. That can only happen through the

light of Christ, to whom we tilt our light like a candle that is lit and passed from person to person.

In dispelling our darkness, the light of Christ shines in us and the outcome of that light is not for people to see how good we are, but to glorify the one who came into the world, whose light may appear to flicker, but can never be fully extinguished.

From the light of Christ, let your light so shine before others that God is glorified. AMEN.