

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Christmas I; 24 December 2019**  
**St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster**  
(rev. 201912241133)

**Lights Shines in Darkness**

*In nomine...*

**I. Intro**

Here at the beginning of the Christmas season, when nights are long and days are short, we know about darkness. We fill our homes and streets with light, trying to keep the darkness at bay. Our gathering space tonight has more candles than at any other time of the year. The shepherds were out watching their sheep by *night*. It was dark. There were no street lights, no illumination coming from nearby Bethlehem.

And suddenly – wow! A great light shone in the midst of the darkness as a messenger from God stood over them to bring news. The shepherds were terrified! Can you imagine, in an age before electric lights: before spotlights, flashlights, or even gaslights? When the angel appeared, unsought, unasked-for, the shepherds' whole world and their very idea of what was possible was turned upside down. They were terrified!

**II. Thesis**

The shepherds make me think of our first lesson, from the prophet Isaiah.

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
on the inhabitants of a country in shadow dark as death light has blazed forth. (Isa 9:1 NJB)*

Isaiah is speaking figuratively about something changing in people's lives, but the figure he uses is the one experienced quite literally by the shepherds.

There's a certain timelessness about such descriptions, speaking of darkness and shadow. These things speak to our imaginations because we know about shadows as dark as death. We know difficulties and challenges, disappointments and loss.

There are seasons in a life. Most of us experience some good seasons. Times when we live in security and plenty, when our children are healthy and our bodies function well. There are other seasons, too, seasons unimagined by those sheltered in the youthful illusions of privilege and strength. It is to those who have known life more fully that the prophet Isaiah is writing. Ones who have known hard times. Ones for whom their labors to maintain a particular standard of living or a particular understanding of themselves has become a yoke of oppression. Ones for whom politics and the demands of jobs have become a yoke of oppression. Ones for whom dedication to family and health and particular causes has become a yoke of oppression.

### **III. Good News**

Isaiah promises that all these will be done away with, traded in, when these yokes are lifted from our shoulders, and instead given over to the dominion of the Messiah, Jesus. As we come to understand that we do not reign in the world, and we turn instead to the one who does, we learn to release all the “should’s” and “must’s” and “ought’s” into the hands of God. Then we begin to experience the freedom of living in response not to our own needs, our own egos, the demands that have been placed upon us by others, but in response only and always to God’s grace poured out for us. All those garments of war, the implements we used to take forcefully from the world that which we thought we must have, are rolled up and burned to keep us warm and perhaps to cook some food that we might share with one another.

It is then that we will experience the joy of the harvest, a harvest not of our own planting. We will rejoice like soldiers victorious amid the plunder, like children come upon a great pile of presents ‘round the Christmas tree on Christmas morning.

### **IV. Invitation**

The shepherds show us the way to that joy. The shepherds were terrified: but they were also courageous and wise. They stepped through their fears and entered into the promises of God, going to see the baby. They told others what they had seen and thereby became themselves angels, messengers from God. Everyone who heard their message of God’s love and presence was astonished. And the shepherds then returned to their fields, returned to their work, changed people who now carried the light within them, *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as they had been told. (Lk 2.20 NJB)* FIN