

SERMON SERIES:  
**GOD IS WITH US**  
Witnesses to His Coming

Grace Christian Church  
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## **GOD IS WITH US – THE WITNESS OF THE SHEPHERDS** (Isaiah 9:2,6,7; Luke 1:26-56; 21-20) Becky Douglass

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Our readings this morning began by talking about people who were “*walking in darkness ... living in a land of deep darkness*”. Our ears prick up at that because, well, it has been a year that has felt pretty dark at times. It has been a year that has reminded us of the uncertainty of life and the very real threats we live with. Sometimes we are able to control the darkness, even hide it completely, but not this year. This year has revealed the darkness in all its ugliness.

There have been several sources of that darkness. Our relationship with the rest of creation has been threatening. We started the year with drought and fires that threatened lives and still threaten livelihoods. We finish the year still in the grip of a pandemic which - every time we think we’ve got it licked – keeps coming back again to take over our lives.

We’ve been reminded that our relationships with each other aren’t too great either. We may not agree with all they have said or the way they have said it, but the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have forced us to think about our deeply entrenched patterns of behaviour which demean and use people. The political and economic systems which we rely on have been in turmoil and our leaders have often failed us. Elsewhere, the world continues to be torn apart by war and poverty and cruelty. At times I have found the news overwhelming, especially as there seems to be little hope of changing anything.

And all these things come on top of what is happening in our own personal lives. People in our church have known the struggle of physical ailments, the pain of difficult relationships, the heaviness of depression and discouragement. We may experience these with varying intensity, but none of us are completely free from them.

In our Bible studies this year, we’ve seen that at the core of all the darkness we face, is the darkness which comes from a broken relationship with God. The God who loves us and made us to be in a love relationship with Himself. Without Him, life can never be whole, can never be what was intended. And so we turn in ourselves and seek to fill our own selfish desires and we hurt others and they hurt us and the darkness and brokenness continues.

If you had talked with those shepherds outside of Bethlehem, they would have told you about the darkness of their world. Their land was occupied by a brutal empire which didn't care at all about the people under its control. They were poor and insignificant among their fellow Jews. Even their religious leaders were unsympathetic. God's people had lost touch with God himself and in His place, they had devised a religion full of rules and regulations that did not reflect the relationship He had intended. Life was hard and there was little hope of anything changing.

But the passage we read in Isaiah doesn't leave us in the darkness. It goes on to say: "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*"

For those shepherds sitting on a dark hillside, their darkness was very literally shattered by the brightness of their angelic visitor! Of course, they were terrified – I would be! I think my first response would be to wonder what I had done wrong and try to hide. No wonder the angel had to start out by telling them not to be afraid, assuring them that he wasn't bringing bad news, but "*good news that will cause great joy for all the people*".

And what was that good news? "*Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*" These words may not mean much to us, but the shepherds would have known exactly what the angel was talking about. The angel was announcing the coming of the one promised in Isaiah: "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness ...*" This was the long-awaited Messiah or chosen one, the descendent of King David who would rule Israel and save His people from the darkness and make everything better again.

And this king would not only save them from the darkness, but he would also bring them into the light and give them life as God always intended them to have. As Isaiah said: "*Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*" We've seen that idea of peace before – '*shalom*' in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament. It means more than just the absence of conflict but means health, flourishing, security, and completeness – the way life ought to be. This is what the angels were singing about when they said, "*Peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests*". They were announcing the birth of the one who would turn the world upside down – or rather, right side up - breaking through the disorder, brokenness and darkness and making everything right again.

This is what those shepherds heard that night, but when they ran into Bethlehem to see this wonderful new King, what did they see? They must have been expecting something spectacular – after all if angels had announced the Messiah's birth to them – unimportant nobodies, how would this birth have been announced to the important people in town?

But what did they find? They found a tradie, a carpenter, and his young wife, caring for an ordinary baby, lying in a common feeding trough, wrapped in poor man's rags. Where was the great king, the "*Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" that Isaiah had talked about? Where was the Messiah they had been looking forward to for hundreds of years? Was this the best that God could do? What would you have thought if you had been there that night? Would you have walked away in disappointment? Would I have struggled to understand what I was seeing? The contrast between the angelic glory and the humble Jesus was extreme.

So how did the shepherds react? We're told that, "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen ...*". I find this amazing and a rebuke to me for my doubt and fear when God doesn't do things the way I expect.

We are not told what they understood about what they had seen and heard. But maybe they caught a glimpse of the truth that God was choosing to enter our dark world and identify with us in that darkness. That it wasn't grand plans or physical might which would change the darkness but love, humility and obedience. That was by suffering the darkness and death himself that he would overcome it on our behalf. Maybe they went away thinking that a Saviour that was born as a poor baby in a manger might actually care about ordinary people and that the salvation and peace that he would bring would be for those like them, too.

We know from the rest of the story that all this is true. God healed our broken relationship with himself by taking the initiative and coming into our world, experiencing our brokenness and darkness. He took our sin onto himself so that he could pay the penalty for that sin and bring us back to God. As one person described it:

*Jesus chose to enter the darkness of human sin and separation from God, in order to shatter the darkness. In its place Jesus offers the warming sunlight of God's love to any who accept that his life and death was intended for them. Jesus came into this world on a mission of hope, a mission to rescue us from the darkness and bring us into His light. (Peter Mead)*

In a year in which the darkness of our broken world cannot be hidden, we do not need to just grit our teeth and hope to endure it. We can grab a hold of what God has given us. Although we still live in a dark world, we can also experience the light of His love if we turn to him. He may not take away all that is broken in our lives, but, if we let Him, He will begin the healing process. And as we are healed by His love, we can spread that healing and light to others. We can bring real change, not from grand plans or physical might, but by spreading the light of His love to others living in the darkness. This is what the shepherds did and what any of us can do! The plan of God is different than anyone expected, but it is also greater than anyone could have hoped for.