

## Christmas at Southridge | Light in the Darkness

What's your favourite thing about Christmas?! *Spend a few moments inviting responses and connecting with the community over their favourite things about Christmas...*

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I've always been a big fan of Christmas with *lots of things* I love about Christmas. And while our daughter is always first to put up Christmas decorations in her room – literally on November 1<sup>st</sup> at midnight! – Lindsay and I are never far behind with music, decorations, and lights. In fact, because of my love for Christmas lights, last year, on the other side of Christmas, I didn't just leave our outdoor lights up, but left them *on*, well into February – a new record for me! At that point, way beyond Lindsay's Christmas-comfort zone for how the neighbours must have felt about us not getting the memo that it was Valentine's!

However, a few years ago, a *new* favourite thing – or reason to love Christmas – was added to my list, a reason I've grown so fond of it may also explain my deep love for Christmas *lights*. You see, with a birthday on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, you might think these days between my birthday and Christmas are *obviously* some of my favourites of the year. However, especially as I've grown older, there's one thing I've begun to really struggle with, and have even come to dislike, at this particular time of year – and that is, *the darkness*.

As you likely know, December 21<sup>st</sup> is what's called the winter solstice in our Northern Hemisphere, marking our shortest day of sunlight throughout our entire year. And I don't know what it is about getting older, but by the time we hit the third week of December, my body and energy levels feel so desperate for some Vitamin D that – even though I have a lot of things I truly love about Christmas – there's a big part of me during *these days* wishing we were on the verge of Canada Day instead of Christmas Day!

But that's where my latest favourite thing about Christmas comes in... You see, a few years ago I learned that one of the reasons December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen by the historic church to be Christmas Day – the specific day celebrating the birth of Jesus – was because it was the first day after the winter solstice where *a little more light* could be perceived. That, at the time of 4th-century science, December 25<sup>th</sup> – three long dark days after the winter solstice – was the first day when things slowly but surely started to get brighter. That while the 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> are all just as dark as the 21<sup>st</sup>, on Christmas, things only start to get brighter from here. And that's become one of my most significant favourite things about Christmas!

Significant, not just because of the hope of a little more Vitamin D in the days ahead, but significant because of the trajectory-changing spiritual reality this symbolizes as well.

Listen to what the ancient prophet Isaiah wrote, about a time they looked forward to when God's presence would arrive on the scene of the world in a fresh new way:

***The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will dawn.***

At the time of Isaiah's writing – nearly eight centuries before the birth of Jesus – the people of ancient Israel were living through a time of deep darkness. Darkness due to spiritual confusion. Darkness due to political division. And darkness because of real and imminent threats of foreign invasion. It was a time when it was hard for people to see. And it felt as though their light of hope may have been turned out for good. But in the midst of their darkness, Isaiah prophesied that one day the *“people who walk in darkness would see a great light”* – that a new light would dawn bringing hope in the midst of darkness.

Fast forward to first-century Judea, though, and things had only gotten worse for Israel – only gotten darker. Now occupied and oppressed under Roman rule, for most first-century Israelites, life was now lived in a perpetual state of fear, anxiety, and crushing poverty.

But right when things seemed darkest of all, there came another prophecy, building off the spirit of Isaiah, when Zechariah the priest, who heard Jesus was to be born, declared:

***Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. Because of God's tender mercy, the Morning Light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness.***

I don't know if you've ever pulled an all-nighter to wait till morning to watch the sunrise, but there's some truth to the idea that *it's always darkest before the dawn*. That when it seems like night may just never end, when everything feels hazy and near-impossible to see, dawn is usually just around the corner. That in those darkest moments the morning light is actually about to break, bringing a new dawn and a new day to push back the darkness.

Earlier this fall – in the midst of these dark days – I was on a morning jog just before sunrise when suddenly a **bright star** caught my attention. As the dawn was peaking over the horizon, there were almost no other stars left in the morning sky, but this star was holding on and stopped me in my tracks because of how much it was standing out in the sky.

Now, it's an understatement to say this photo doesn't do justice to the star as you may not even be able to see it here because I think I may own the oldest still-functioning iPhone on the planet – take that planned-obsolescence! But if you look really closely, you can **notice it here!** Or better yet, **zoomed in here!** See it?!? A lone star in the eastern sky, just before dawn, distinctly standing out by shining far bigger and far brighter than your run-of-the-mill star, right in the midst of the darkness before the dawn. So bright (trust me!), you could say it almost had the feel of a “*morning light breaking from heaven*,” shining brightly in the sky in a world that was otherwise still mostly dark and making things hard to see.

What I actually saw that morning is commonly referred to what's known as the **"Morning Star"** – which you can see way better in this photo and which, in modern astronomy, we know as the planet Venus – which at certain times can be seen brightly and uniquely right before sunrise because of how close Venus orbits the sun. A unique "star" that shines brightly before the dawn to let the world know that the light of a new day is on its way.

And friends, that has recently become one of my most favourite things about Christmas, because that's exactly what Christmas represents. That, in the same way our days only start to slowly but surely get brighter from here – starting tomorrow morning, thank God! – because of the birth of Jesus, that's the hope for our world and our lives as well! That in Jesus, a *Morning Star* has come, pointing to and revealing a new day that is on its way, that is dawning in and through him. In fact, on the very last page of the Bible, this is the exact symbol and image Jesus uses to effectively sign off, describing himself as the light of hope that is on the horizon, bringing the hope of a new day to the world, by saying:

***I, Jesus... am the bright Morning Star.***

That while there's still much darkness and chaos in our lives and in our world, because of the arrival of Jesus on the scene some 2,000 years ago – and not just because of his birth, but through his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection – Jesus now shines like an eternal Morning Star that not only gives hope, but guarantees the trajectory of a new day dawning in our world!

Friends, on Christmas, not only does each day start to get a little brighter, but because of the birth of Jesus – the one who is *the bright Morning Star* – we can now live with the hope of a new light and a new day dawning in the world. A day that we are not only invited to put our hope in but to be part of bringing and shining in the world along with him for others to see!

So that leaves us with the question: Where do you feel you are walking in darkness this Christmas? Or what part of your life or our world feels darkest to you these days? Perhaps it's the condition of your marriage or family or friendships. Maybe it's struggles at work or with finances. Maybe it's an overwhelming sense of grief, fear or anxiety. Or hurts and pains from past experiences of faith and religion. Or struggles with temptation and addiction.

And in the midst of our darkness, how might the birth of Jesus actually have the potential to shine new light and bring the new hope of a new day dawning? How might the person of Jesus – whose life and teaching and way and love and Spirit shine in the world like a Morning Star – actually bring a new vision for our lives, inviting us to participate in bringing this new day into the world by following his life and his love together, even, or especially, if and when the circumstances around us still feel dark?

Friends, while I have lot of things I love about Christmas, these days there might be nothing more significant I love about this time of year more than the reality that things only start to get brighter from here. And because of Jesus, that's not only true of our daylight, but can be true of our lives and our world as well because of the new light and new hope and new love that is shining and available in him.

A new light – *a bright Morning Star* – shining in the darkness in and through the birth of Jesus at Christmas!

### **Moment of Reflection**

As the band comes forward and we begin to wrap up our time tonight, we want to have a moment to pause and reflect on any of the ways we're feeling the darkness of our world these days. To sit with the reality of the darkness, not running from it or ignoring it, but acknowledging it and letting ourselves feel it as a very real part of our lives and experience.

To help us do this, we're actually going to **lower the lights in the room** for a few moments to let ourselves sit with the darkness. If it helps, you're also welcome to simply close your eyes as a way to pause and reflect.

Now for a moment, I invite you to consider (*slowly and reflectively*): Where does life feel darkest to you these days? What is it about your life that feels dark, or hard to see, or confusing, or perhaps hopeless? For some of you, in the midst of your darkness, maybe you feel like you can see the dawn coming on the horizon, but for others, it may still feel like you're right in the thick of the darkness before the dawn...

*Pause for Reflection*

Now consider (*slowly and reflectively*): How can we let Jesus meet us in our darkness? How can the bright Morning Star of the light of Jesus be a sign that gives us hope? Hope that things won't always be this way? Hope that things can, in fact, grow and change? Hope that light can break into our darkness to bring the promise of a new day?

And how might seeing Jesus more clearly for who he really is bring this light and hope in the midst of our darkness? How can the reality of Jesus coming at Christmas assure us that a new day is dawning, that the light is coming – that things only start to get brighter from here?

*Take a moment to pray before the choir comes in with Silent Night...*