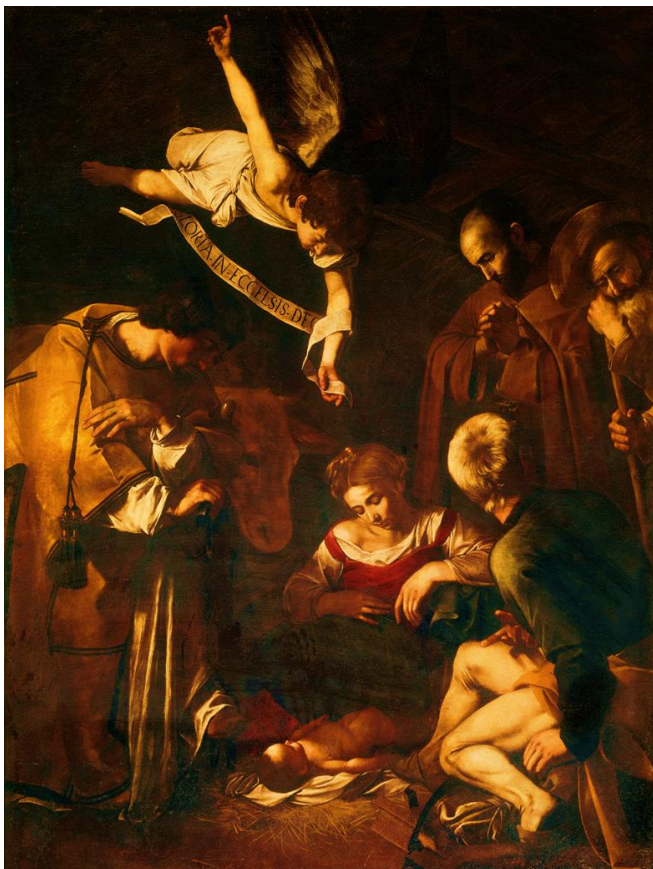


CHRISTMAS EVE 2022

Be Born In Us Today Bringing Light

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**"* Luke 2:8-11, especially v. 11

On this Christmas Eve I am reminded of a painting titled *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence*.



The artist was Michelangelo da Merisi, whom we know as Caravaggio, the name of his hometown in Italy. Caravaggio includes two people in the painting who were clearly not alive at the time of Christ's birth. They are St. Francis and St. Lawrence. This can be

explained by the fact that the piece was painted as an altarpiece for the Prayer Chapel of St. Lawrence near the Basilica of St. Francis in Palermo, Italy.

Caravaggio paints Mary, Joseph, and the rest of the figures in the style of clothes that people wore in his day, the 1600s. If that was done today, we might see Joseph dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

The realism is stands out. He doesn't show Mary with a halo, with a gown clean and pressed, and every hair in place as many religious paintings did. Instead, he depicts Mary as a weary young woman, slouching, disheveled and exhausted from travel and giving birth. Very realistic! The Christ Child rests on a pile of hay at her feet.

What haunts me, though, is the darkness of the scene. I admit I forget sometimes that the announcement of Jesus' birth came first to shepherds who were working the 3rd shift through the night.

("keeping watch over their flock by night" Luke 2:8.) Have you ever been out in the country at night with no street light, no house lights around? If you are under a canopy of trees, or the sky above is cloudy with no star light, it can be dark. Very, very dark. You can't even see your hand in front of your face.

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That dark night sky over those Judean hills was shattered by both an "angel of the Lord" and the bright "glory of the Lord." It must have changed instantaneously from pitch blackness to absolute blinding brilliance! Then the angel announced to the shepherds ***"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"*** Luke 2:11. Night and day, darkness and light!

The darkness of night is all over this painting. Out of the darkness, an almost unnatural light falls on the figures in Caravaggio's painting. He would become known for his use of what is called "chiaroscuro" (kee·aa·ruh·skyúr·ow). This is an artistic

technique of painting darkness and shadows, and then beaming light on the figures he wants us to see.

The use of darkness and light gives this painting a special meaning at Christmas. Caravaggio's style gives us a picture of Isaiah's prophecy that **"the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"** (Isaiah 9:2).

We can't help but think of John's words in the first chapter of his gospel. John repeats several times in his gospel that Jesus is the light. So John wrote: **"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"** (John 1:5). The light is Jesus. The darkness of our world, of our greed and hatred and selfishness, the darkness of our human hearts, cannot smother God's light in Jesus.

Have you ever noticed that? Walk into a pitch black room. Turn on a faint nightlight, or strike a match. That small light will invade every corner of a dark room. Light always pierces through darkness, overcomes darkness. Its never the other way around. Darkness never makes a light dimmer.

John wrote for us, **"The light [- Jesus -] shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"** (John 1:5).

There's a back story to this painting that is an example of light piercing through the darkness. This painting of Jesus' birth, this painting of the Light of God entering our world, was created by a man full of darkness. Caravaggio was a scoundrel and a criminal. He drank hard and lived hard. He was often angry and explosive. He killed a man and was on the run for much of his adult life. He died at age 37. It's this troubled young man who painted the shadows and darkness so that we could better see Jesus, The Light of the world.

And there is a dark story about this painting. The painting is gone. It was stolen in 1969, cut from its frame, and has never been recovered. A rumor has circulated for decades that it has been destroyed, lost forever. A replica now stands in the chapel at Palermo where the original once was.

So, in several ways this painting of the Nativity is the story of light penetrating the darkness.

there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,

Light penetrating darkness was the story of the first Christmas night. The angels appeared with a brilliance we can't even imagine. They tore the sky apart to let the world know the great news: God Himself had come to earth, to save us people.

Light overcoming darkness is our story too.

We often picture Jesus' birth as being perfect and beautiful. Christmas cards and songs have sappy words about Jesus asleep peacefully on the hay, shepherds looking on adoringly, a stary sky above. How wonderful. Yet, let's get real! Newborn babies may sleep ... but not very long. Mostly they cry. Shepherds may have come in wonder, but they lived with animals and carried body odor, and lice. A stable where animals are kept has a pungent stink of its own. Jesus' birth wasn't a perfect. He entered a world full of trouble and sin.

It was the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus who ordered the tax that compelled Joseph to take Mary and journey to Bethlehem. They had to climb 1400 feet up in elevation to get there. It was a grueling journey! Caesar Augustus was not a nice guy. He did not believe in the true God of the Bible. In fact, he proclaimed that he was a deity and demanded people worship him. And Quirinius was the Governor of Syria. He was a pagan. Known to protect his power by any means possible.

Why do I mention this? Because can you imagine living a life that isn't perfect? Can you imagine being compelled to do something that is grueling and leaves you exhausted? Can you imagine living in a time when the people who call the shots are not godly people?

You can, can't you? Because you do. It was a time of darkness then, and you live in a time of darkness, don't you?

Your darkness may be more personal. You may be haunted and pursued by guilt, like the painter Caravaggio. Then for you this

night there is forgiveness in Jesus who came and took your sin's punishment in your place. For you the light of Christ has come.

Maybe your darkness is loneliness and isolation. You feel like you're in a room of people yet still utterly alone. Then for you this night there is the light of Jesus who knew forsakenness, complete aloneness on the cross. He went through that darkness for you. He is alive now, and a constant, companion who understands. For you the light of Christ has come.

Maybe tonight the darkness in your life is conflict. You have been at odds with another person for too long and you're tired of the battle. Then for you tonight there can be peace and reconciliation. For you the light of Christ has come.

Perhaps tonight the darkness you feel is despair. Darkness is everywhere in your life. Then for you this night there is hope. Jesus came to overcome the pain, the troubles, the sicknesses we walk through in a world broken by sin. For you the light of Christ has come to bring hope.

Maybe you are one who cannot find their way in the dark. You feel lost in the night. Then for you this night there is a light to guide you, if you will only trust him. Trust Jesus to guide your steps. For you the light of Christ has come.

And if the darkness of your life is so dark that death seems a welcome friend, you've lost the light of living, then to you this night Christ is born. There still is light to live by and purpose for your days. For you, too, the light and life of Christ have come.

Have you ever walked into a movie theater on a bright, sunny day? Most of us have. At first, you can't see anything. You can't find your way. You may feel your way to a seat, hoping you don't tip and fall on a step you can't see. Then, after a while, the pupils in your eyes begin to adjust. Now you can see the people sitting around you.

The same happens in our lives. Often people are in the dark so long that they get used to darkness. They live in darkness so long, they forget what it is to live in the light of Jesus. They think

their darkness is the light. They condemn others who don't agree with their opinion because they believe the way they see things is reality. The truth, though, is without Jesus, the Light of the World, they are in the dark, and used to the dark.

God used Isaiah to speak on this condition. God guided him to write for us:

***Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter! Isaiah 5:20***

This happens all the time in our world, doesn't it? This has become common in our times. The truth of God is called darkness. And trendy, man-made opinions are called light. People who do not receive Jesus are in the dark, they become accustomed to the dark, and their understanding is darkened. They think they are enlightened, and lecture others as if they are the source of light and understanding. Yet the saddest part is they don't realize they are blinded by the hardness of their hearts set against God. And we are not exempt. You may need to stop and examine your own heart. Without Christ, without God, there is only darkness.

The birth of Jesus Christ, that great invasion of light, does not creep up on us like a sunrise that brightens the sky slowly, gradually. The birth of Jesus explodes in the night sky of the first Christmas with the glory of God, and angel light, and the light of the world. All this light in a baby in a barn.

John put it this way: ***The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. John 1:9***

God knew all about our sinful darkness better than we do, and still He came to earth for us. Jesus is true light and glory of God and yet, He came down, down into a baby boy, into our human race, born of peasants, in a po-dunk town, in a barn. Yet, His coming

“gives light to everyone” John wrote. He into our human race so that He can trade places with humans like you. He lived a sinless life you can’t and don’t.

Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?”

Luke 22: 63-64

To save you, He traded places with you to take onto Himself your suffering you deserve for your dark deeds. In His suffering Jesus went into the darkness. He submitted to being blindfolded as soldiers beat Him.

from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. *Matthew 27:45*

And then the worst darkness of all. On the cross, when He gave His life as the sacrifice to pay for all sin of all time, even the natural world turned dark.

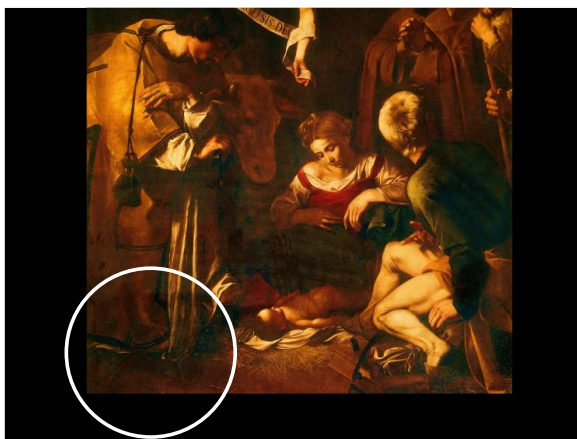
I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. *John 12:46*

In death, Jesus’ body was placed in the darkness of a tomb. Then on Easter morning – at sunrise – He shattered the darkness of sin and it’s consequences. He brought out of the grave light and new life, hope for today and home for eternity, victory, and peace. These are freely given. They are gifts with no strings attached. Trust in Jesus and you will not remain in darkness but live all your days in the Light of the World.

People, this is a night to hear the good news: ***“For unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”*** *Luke 2:11.* It will not do to say that you’ve heard the story before. Receive it as news, news that changed history, news that changes your history.

Christmas Eve is a time for love and laughter, song and prayer. Those are all appropriate responses to the news that THE LIGHT has come. This is a night for singing and shouting a chorus of hoorays and hallelujahs. Celebrate the light! Jesus the light has come. He shines His grace and love and truth to change dark sinful

hearts and lives like yours and mine into shiny and clean and new.



I would like us to take one last look at Caravaggio's Nativity. Look closely at the perspective of the painting. From what point of view are you looking at the scene? Look and see. You are right there in the foreground, on your knees, next to the shepherd, worshiping the Christ Child, the Light of the world. There is room for you there, and there is light!

Amen.