**REALITY REVEALED: A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE**

**Luke 1:77-79**

**INTRODUCTION**

Christmas for many is the most exciting part of the year. The snow is starting to fall, Christmas music is playing on the radio, people are bustling about buying gifts for friends and family, and many are looking forward to some time off school or work.

A big part of the excitement of Christmas has to do with Christmas decorations. Many families will get a tree, some from tree farms, others from Canadian Tire, and they will decorate those trees with lights and ornaments. Many will buy wreaths and red ribbons and put them on their doors or their landscaping. More recently, people have been placing giant inflatables on their lawns or buying light projectors that spray coloured dots all over the house. Christmas is rich with imagery. It’s one of the things that makes it so unique.

But have you ever paused to ask why we have all this imagery? After all, images are only meant to represent other things. They are symbols of greater realities. They’re like pictures. There’s a big difference between a picture of your loved ones and your loved ones themselves. That’s what an image is: a picture of a greater reality.

And yet, it can be so easy to love the imagery while ignoring the greater realities they are meant to serve. We get excited about Christmas imagery as if it’s about the imagery itself, and not what the imagery is meant to point to. But loving the imagery while ignoring the reality is like hugging a photo while paying no attention to the actual person who is in the photo.

Today I want to pause and reflect on the meaning of one of my favourite images of the season: Christmas lights. My family and I live in Oak Ridges just east of here. Recently, I started going on prayer walks around my neighbourhood, either before my kids are up or after they’ve gone to bed. At both times, the sun’s already down and the neighbourhood is mostly dark. I enjoy the quiet and the solitude. Usually no one else is around, and very few cars are on the road. It’s a special time for me to walk with God, talk to Him, and experience His presence.

But as people started putting up their Christmas lights, it added something entirely new to my prayer walk experiences. I was struck by both the presence of lights and the absence of lights. The lights made me more aware of the darkness around me, the houses and the patches of road not illuminated by lights. Those patches looked dreary, tired, empty, lifeless. But when I would see a house covered with lights, it was like a beacon of hope, a reminder that the darkness would not remain. The darkness was not all encompassing. It could be pierced by even the smallest of lights. Christmas lights are a reminder that a new era is coming, and our dark world will once again be filled with light.

Today I want to spend a few minutes thinking about this imagery as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. I have titled this message **Reality Revealed: A Christmas Message**

Many of the most well-known elements of the Christmas story come from a book of the Bible called the Gospel of Luke. It’s where we read about the angel appearing to Mary, the angelic choir appearing to the shepherds, and the birth of Jesus in an animal feeding trough called a manger. It’s in these accounts that Jesus is revealed to us. We’re told who he is, what he has come to earth to do, and what he demands of us.

In Luke 1, we find a story about an elderly priest named Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth. Through God’s miraculous intervention, they welcomed their first son into the world, and they were told by an angel that their son would be a great prophet. Their baby’s name was John, and he would prepare the way for the coming Messiah, the one sent by God to rescue his people. Zechariah is full of joy, and responds to God with a song of praise and thanksgiving. The lyrics of that song are found in 1:68-79. In that song, Zechariah says some profound things about God, about his son John, and about Jesus. I’m going to read the entirety of the song, starting at verse 67 and going to verse 79.

**Read Luke 1:67-79**

We’re going to focus on what Zechariah tells us about Jesus in verses 77-79 of his song, and we will break it up into three parts:

1. The Darkness of the World
2. The Dawning of the Light
3. The Decision for all Mankind

If you’re visiting today, I just want to say thanks for being here. We’re honoured by your presence. And if you’re exploring Christianity, I want to extend a special welcome to you. It takes courage to attend a religious service you’re not familiar with.

In the next 25 minutes or so, I’m going to share something with you that could completely change your life. It’s a message that has brought life and light to countless people throughout history. It’s called the gospel. The gospel is at the heart of Christmas, the Christian Scriptures, and the Christian faith itself. The gospel is what distinguishes Christianity from other religions. And the gospel has the power to change every aspect of your life: your priorities, your values, your emotions, your very identity. But there’s one condition: you must believe. I urge you, therefore, to listen carefully to what I am going to share with you. For if you believe the gospel, you will never be the same.

(1) **THE DARKNESS OF THE WORLD**

The high point of our text today is the stunning picture in verse 78 of a “sunrise” visiting us “from on high”. Zechariah is telling us that the coming of Jesus is like the coming of the sunrise. Jesus has come to light up the world. The implication, then, is that before Jesus comes, the world is in darkness. And the darkness of the world means that those who live in the world live in darkness. That’s made clear at the beginning of verse 79. It describes us as “those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death”.

What does this mean, that the world is in darkness and that we sit in darkness? It means we do not see the world clearly. This is a striking claim. It means that there are realities about the world, about God, and about ourselves that we cannot understand. Most of us have had the experience of trying to feel our way around a pitch black room, a room so dark that you can’t even see your hand in front of your face. Coming to an accurate understanding of the world is like that, except the room we’re trying to figure out is not just a room. It’s reality itself.

In the late 17th and the 18th centuries, Western thought was dominated by the idea that reality could be completely understood through the use of human reason. If we just think hard enough about reality, and if we just study long enough using scientific tools, we will know all that needs to be known about the world and about human nature. This was called the Enlightenment, and it gave birth to an era of thinking called modernism.

More recently, in the 20th century, our culture has become disenchanted with our ability to make any accurate conclusions whatsoever about reality. Yes, individuals can make conclusions about reality, but no one can really make *accurate* conclusions. Truth, with a capital “T”, was reduced truth, with a lower-case “t”. Truth has become relative. It is whatever individuals choose to make it. This is commonly known as post-modernism.

Are either of these views satisfactory? The modernists say we can know everything through science, but we know that science can’t answer many of our most fundamental questions. It can’t address why we live by moral standards, why we expect others to live by those moral standards, and why we can feel outrage and anger when others fail to live by those moral standards.

The post-modernists say that we may believe that we know everything, but in the end we really know nothing. It says that our moral standards have no *objective* value. They’re not so much standards as they are preferences. Today, we could say that murder is wrong, but tomorrow we could say that murder is right, and that would be completely fine. Does this resonate at all with how we actually live?

When I was in law school at Osgoode, I studied jurisprudence (or the philosophy of law) with a brilliant professor trained at Oxford. To my knowledge, he had no religious background. And yet, he taught us that the law is not just the creation of mankind, to be shaped and defined from one generation to another. He taught us that the law has *objective* value. The law should conform to objective, moral standards that exist in reality regardless of whether humans recognize them. I have come to realize that he’s not just an outlier, but a representative of a much larger group of philosophers who are now taking the same view.

It seems that we know that there are questions about life that science and reason cannot answer, and yet we nevertheless thirst for answers. We see pain and suffering in the world. We see children dying in Syria. We see drunk drivers killing pedestrians. And yet we don’t just say “they’re just living according to *their* moral truth. I may believe that genocide is wrong, but I can’t impose that on anyone else.” We don’t live like that. Instead, we say that genocide is *evil*. We say that drunk driving is *wrong*.

Once in a while, a movie comes out that challenges some of the deepest assumptions we have about life. One of those movies for myself, and for many others, was the 1999 film *The Matrix*. In that film, a computer hacker named Thomas Anderson, aka “Neo”, is hounded by a burning question in his mind he has no idea how to answer: “what is the matrix?” This question drives him, consumes him, until he meets Morpheus, a mysterious dark figure who wears long leather trench coats and arm-less glasses. In their first encounter, Morpheus says this to Neo, and I think that many of us can relate to it:

Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me.

The question, “what is the matrix?” is really the question, “what’s wrong with the world?” It expresses the sense of uneasiness that we feel, our discomfort with the world. You feel like there’s something wrong with the world, but you don’t know what it is. Sometimes you feel it, sometimes you don’t, but it’s always there, like a splinter in your mind. It’s the darkness that characterizes our world, the darkness that keeps us from seeing reality as it really is. And so can we find answers? And if so, where?

(2) **THE DAWNING OF THE LIGHT**

One thing should be obvious: the answers must come from outside our world. This leads to our second point: the dawning of the light.

If the world is full of darkness, and we all live in the darkness, then all of us are equally unable to provide the answers we’re looking for. Asking a mere man to answer these questions is like asking a blind man what the sun looks like. This is why we need Jesus.

Jesus Christ existed eternally outside of creation, outside of time, and outside of sin. He is not of our world. There is no darkness in him. He is pure light: the source of all goodness, the definition of righteousness, and the perfection of greatest beauty. Jesus is the Lord of creation, the God of all, and the Saviour of all mankind.

And in order to save us, Jesus came down from heaven to light up the world. God became man and walked among us, fully God and yet fully man, to bring the light that our dark world desperately needs. And his coming was not just the flicker of a candle in a remote corner of the world. His coming was like the sunrise.

Jesus was the sunrise who visited us “from on high”, as verse 78 tells us. Like the sun, his origins are from outside our world. Like the sun, he dispels the darkness and illuminates the world. And like the sun, he finally enables us to see true reality.

And what is that reality? It’s the reality that we see in verse 77: Jesus came to give “knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” Jesus came to reveal the meaning and beauty of this wonderful phrase: “the forgiveness of their sins.” But before we can know the *forgiveness* of our sins, we need to know that we are *sinners*.

In the early 20th century, a British newspaper solicited essays from the public attempting answers to the question, “What’s wrong with the world?” In response, G.K. Chesterton, a well-known writer and philosopher, famously replied with two, profound words: “I am”.

Many of us know that there’s something wrong with the world, but not many of us would admit that we are the problem. We’re much more likely to blame the bad guys out there – the terrorists, the fundamentalists, the racists, the bigots – than to claim that we are responsible for any of the brokenness of the world.

But Jesus came to show us that change in the world begins with change in ourselves. My selfishness, my greed, my anger, my pride, my lust – these are the things that need to be changed for the world to be made right. The same evil that we see in the bad guys is the same evil that dwells inside each of us. Sin is universal to the human condition.

But how do we deal with sin? We don’t have the power to deal with it ourselves. This evil is so deeply ingrained in our minds and our hearts that we are powerless to free ourselves from it. The Bible goes so far as to say that we are “slaves of sin”. Sin is like our master. It controls us. It owns us. And the only one who can free us is another master, a greater master. The only one who can free us is God himself.

This is where we get to the forgiveness of our sins. Before God would free us from our sins, he would have to forgive our sins. This is because our sin isn’t just something that enslaves us. Our sin is an offence against God. Our sin attracts God’s *just* punishment. It’s a punishment that accords with his justice. If he didn’t punish sin, he wouldn’t be just, and if he were not just, he would not be God.

But God is not only just. He is also merciful. God desires to show mercy to sinners, not only justice. He desired to show us his *tender* mercy, as we see in verse 78. And so, God sends Jesus to earth, not just to reveal sin to us, but to pay the penalty of our sin for us. Jesus became a human being to bear the punishment that human beings deserve, and he did that by dying on the cross. This was the only way that God’s justice and mercy could be satisfied. It’s the only way that God could extend the *forgiveness* of our sins to us. Jesus died the death that we deserved so that we could live the life that he deserved.

This is the true power of the sunrise from on high. Jesus didn’t just come to *reveal* reality to us. He came to *recreate* reality. He came not only to reveal darkness; he came to shatter the darkness. He shows us that we are sinners, and then he pays the penalty deserved by sinners. And he did this not because we did anything to deserve it, but because of his *tender mercy*.

(3) **THE DECISION FOR ALL MANKIND**

This leads to our last point: the decision for all mankind. The second half of verse 79 says that Jesus would “guide our feet into the way of peace”. Peace. That is the promise Jesus holds out to us. It’s a peace that permeates every aspect of our lives. It’s peace with God, because he has forgiven our sins and no longer holds them against us. It’s peace in our relationships, because we show the same tender mercy to others that God showed to us. And it’s peace in our souls, because the splinter in our minds is finally removed. We finally know not only what’s wrong with the world, but that Jesus has done and is doing something about it.

But this peace only comes after you’ve decided to let Jesus be your guide. He’s willing to guide you into the way of peace, but you also must be willing to let him guide you. The light of his revelation of reality, and the light of the tender mercy shown to sinners on the cross, only comes to those who stop trusting in themselves and start trusting in him instead.

Many of you probably know Christians. They could be your neighbours, your coworkers, your friends, your family members, or the person you’re sitting beside right now. You’ve probably noticed that Christians are a little different, perhaps even *very* different. I’m not just talking about our weird idiosyncrasies. I’m talking about the way that we see the world. We see the world in vastly different ways than the world. And it all started with a decision: a decision to trust that Jesus knows better than we do, that he is the light that pierced through our darkness, that he is the one to reveal and recreate reality for us.

And this reality is one that makes way more sense of life than any other worldview you could ever encounter. No other worldview has such a coherent vision of reality that accords with experience, reason, and our deepest human desires. Jesus shows us how to make sense of suffering, how to satisfy our deepest longings, how to understand our purpose in this world, and how to engage in the work of making our world a better place. Christianity gives us a story, a meta-narrative, that helps us understand *all* of life.

As Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis said in one of my favourite quotes:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

If you’re curious to learn more about Christianity, we want you to know that we’re here for you. This decision that we all need to make is not a trivial one. It’s the most significant decision we could ever make. It will completely change the way that you view the world, the way that you view yourself, and the way that you view God. We want to walk with you on this journey to help you decide whether Christianity is true. And we sincerely pray that you will find that the light of Christ makes sense of reality, and that his light offers you both answers to your questions and peace for your soul.

**CONCLUSION**

And so the next time you see Christmas lights at night, remember that true reality is not the darkness that we see around us. True reality is not bleak, tired, and lifeless. It is not characterized by sin and brokenness. Instead, true reality is that which is hinted at by the bright lights shining in the darkness, these little lamps that serve as a sign, pointing to the greater light of Christ. He is the sunrise who has visited us from on high, both to reveal and to recreate reality.

When life seems to be going sideways, when suffering doesn’t just make sense, or when the splinter in your mind just won’t leave you alone, remember that Jesus offers you peace – a deep, abiding peace that will endure through the hardest of trials. My prayer for all of you this Christmas is that you would believe the gospel and put your trust in Christ, for he alone has the power to dispel the darkness with the beauty, mercy, and glory of his pure light.