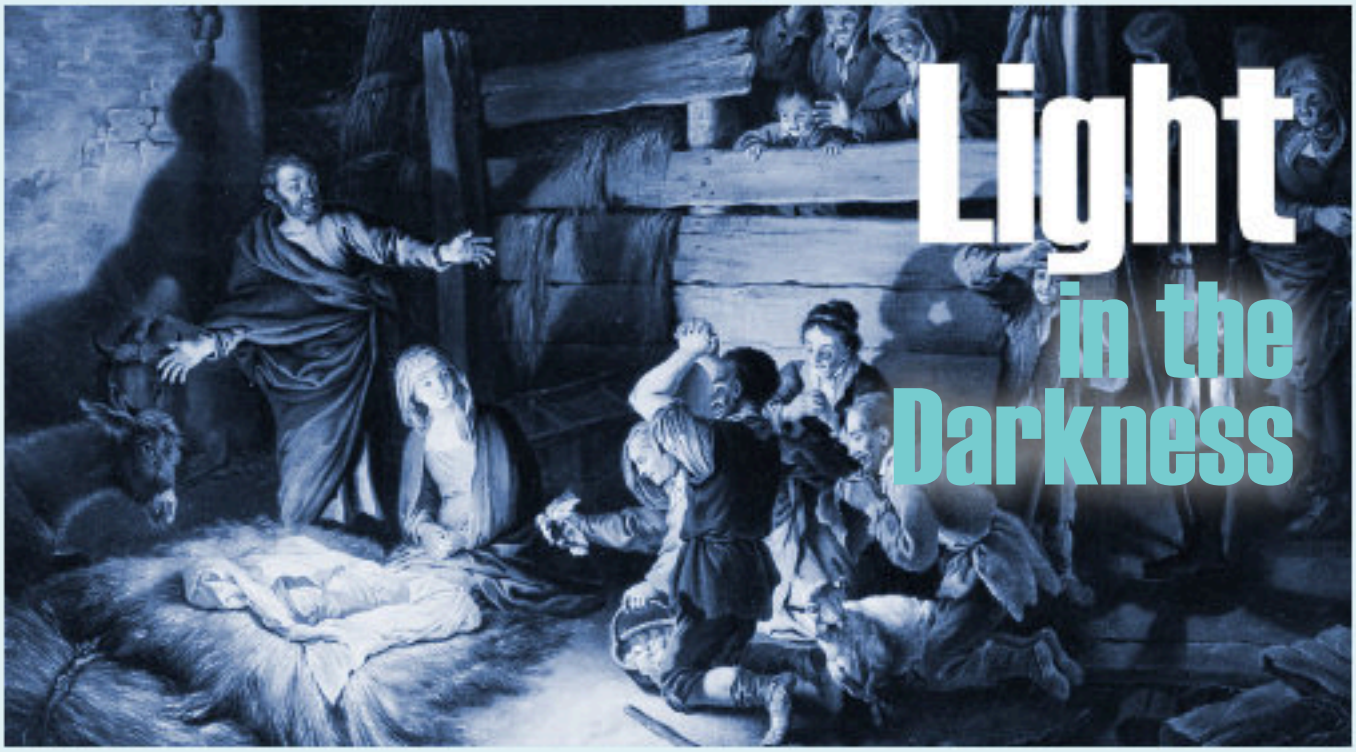

Light in the Darkness

We are born into a world of darkness, into a land of deep darkness. We are surrounded by the darkness of ignorance and error. How many men go through life ignorant of the most important and fundamental truths: Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? Do I possess an immortal soul? Is there a God? What is He like? Does He care about me? Living without answers to these questions is to live in darkness. Then there is the even deeper darkness of sin and evil, the darkness of hatred and violence and cruelty. There is the darkness we find when we look into our own hearts: our angers and resentments and unforgiveness, our lusts and our greed and our pride.

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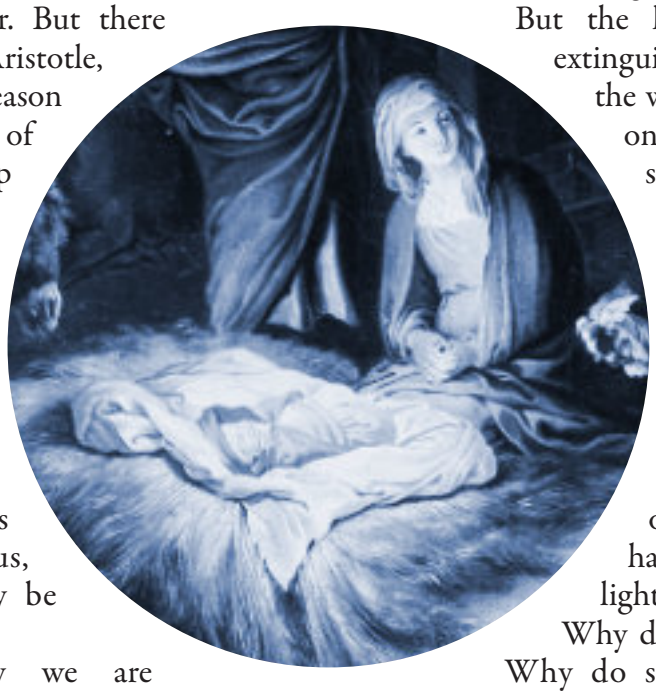
Experiencing this darkness, men have sought in various ways to make sense out of our world; to make sense of themselves. In this regard, we can turn to the efforts of men of great genius and humanity, the poets of old, who created stories in an attempt to explain the present condition of our world. There exists this whole world of myth and stories that have been written in ancient times that we can still read and study today. One finds in these myths and stories much human wisdom and much that is worthwhile mixed together with much that is false. These stories are often an attempt by men to make the invisible visible, to make the abstract concrete, to give what is divine a habitation and a name.

In the end, however, this attempt to bring light into our darkness by the poets must fail, because we all know that these are only stories, fabricated by the imaginations of men. Products of the imagination lack substance; they do not give us solid food that can satisfy. But God satisfies this longing of the human heart to bring meaning to one's life, to make the invisible visible, the intangible tangible, and to give the divine a habitation and a name, by giving us a story that is full of magic and wonder. It is a story about the

Queen of the Universe who gives birth to a God; to a God who will die and rise again; who will give us His flesh to eat and His blood to drink, so that we may partake of the divinity and become gods ourselves. And this story completely satisfies, because we know it is not just a story. It is fact, it is history. It happened. It's real.

Besides the poets, you will also find the efforts of the philosophers who with their keen intelligence and reason sought to penetrate the riddles of our existence and to shed light on the darkness of human life and history. Much of their efforts ended in error, sometimes very serious error. But there were some, like Plato and Aristotle, who by the power of their reason (and, I believe, with the help of God's grace) came to a deep knowledge of certain truths about man and God. But for all the marvelous truth that they discovered, they were left with certain insoluble mysteries. They reasoned to the existence of one spiritual God, but had no way of knowing whether this God has any concern for us, whether He could possibly be interested in our affairs.



We find in the story we are contemplating at Christmas, the presence of the philosophers in the persons of the three Wise Men. They journey to Bethlehem not in order to teach this Child their wisdom, but in order to learn from Him. And having met this Child and His mother, they go away satisfied, their minds enlightened. If a great philosopher like Aristotle could have come to know the mystery of Bethlehem, with the light of faith, he would have found the answers to his questions in a way that far exceeded his wildest dreams.

When we contemplate the manner in which God entered into our world to bring us His light, it ought to be a source of ceaseless wonder. One might think that when God Almighty, with all His majesty and power came into our world, He could not help but flood the world with a brilliant and overpowering light. But rather than making such a grand entrance, he enters in a hidden fashion, quietly, in silence. When we consider the whole Christmas story, we can be left with the impression that God is coming into the world as if He were invading enemy territory, furtively and by stealth. I suppose we could even see God's entrance into the world as the most brilliantly executed commando mission of all times. The cave of Bethlehem was not only a poor stable meant to teach our poor hearts where our true riches lie, it was also a hideout from enemy forces. The hooves of Herod's horseman could be heard echoing in the cave as they rode above it seeking to destroy this Child and extinguish the Light of the world. Those forces have never ceased in their efforts to destroy the light.

But the light of Christ cannot be extinguished. Christ is the Light of the world, the only true light, the only one who can possibly make sense out of our existence. If we are honest with ourselves, we would have to acknowledge that there is a part of us that is disappointed and disillusioned about the way in which the light of God has come into the darkness of our world. Why couldn't He have made His presence and the light of His truth more manifest? Why does it have to be so hidden? Why do so few people find it and rejoice in it? If He would just show Himself more manifestly and conspicuously to the world, so much of the darkness and evil would be dispersed and overcome.

God knows what He is doing. The reception of this light into the human heart is not something that God wants to bring about by means of force and violence. There is something mysterious about this light. It is a purifying light that cannot coexist with anything that is false. In order to receive it, it demands that we give something of ourselves; it demands the sacrifice of our desire to be in control and our desire to understand everything. It is a light that can only shine in a heart that is willing to accept mystery; it is a light that cannot be received unless we make room for another Person. Yes, we want this light to be so powerful as to overcome all the evil in the world that makes our lives so painful and problematic, but we must also ask ourselves: Are we willing to let this light come into the dark places of

our *own* hearts? Or are we afraid of this little baby?

This light enters the human heart in the same way that it came to Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago—not with force or violence, but in stillness and silence, not amidst the noise and bustle of human effort and activity, but as a gift freely given and freely received. The miracle of Christmas is repeated every time this light transforms a human heart; every time it softens the hardness of our hearts. There is much darkness in the world. It seems that, with it, there is a growing sense of discouragement and despondency among good people in the face of the degradation in our culture, in the face of the corruption in our politics and in the Church. One can have the sense that the forces of evil and darkness are gaining strength. One can even be left with the impression that the darkness is stronger than the light and that in the end the darkness might prevail. If we are haunted by such thoughts and sentiments, have we really understood the message of Christmas? "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"(Jn. 1:5)... The darkness has not overcome the light because the darkness is *powerless* to overcome it. In the end, light and love are stronger forces than darkness and evil.