

"THE DAYSPRING FROM ON HIGH"

"Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Luke 1:78-79.

We are approaching the day which is rich above all other days in hallowed and joyous memories. Other birthdays are dear to us and we keep them with pleasant and thankful thoughts, but none of them can be compared with that of which the Christmastide reminds us. The associations of (Christmas) Day, the tenderest and most loved of all the days of the year, are winsomely beautiful and poetically tender. This is the day for reunions, when kinsfolk who have been widely separated meet again around the firesides they love. It is the day when we have the inclination and the time to be kind, the day when love and brotherhood crowd out the selfish interests that fill our other days. It is a time when earth and heaven seem to meet, and we recognize in the very pathos of things the nearness of God. Never more than this year have we needed to remember the religious meaning of Christmas, and once more to enthrone the incarnate Christ in our hearts, and homes, and civilization.

Christ's coming into this world is proclaimed in our text as the dawning of a new day in human history. The world has never been the same since His coming. The song of Zacharias, which suggests this Christmas sermon, is an exceedingly beautiful and meaningful song. This devout priest had found Gabriel's message too wonderful for even his strong faith at first; so he suffered the punishment of temporary dumbness, the chastisement helping, as it often does, the recovery of his faith. These words are part of the beautiful song of thanksgiving which burst from the pent-up feelings of his heart, like a fountain rushing from some hidden cave into the sunlight, on the day of his own son's circumcision and in the hour when his speech was restored.

His own son was indeed a wonderful son and had been most wonderfully born, and he had great reason to rejoice and hope in him. But nothing is more striking in the story than the fact that in such circumstances it is not of his own son that he sings, but the Son of Mary, and that he only mentions his son incidentally as the prophet and preparer of the way of that coming One who was to be infinitely greater than he. It is of this greater son that he sings: "the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." What a beautiful and suggestive name Zacharias here gives to the infant Christ Jesus, "The Dayspring from on High."

He was Mary's first baby, and as such was the light and joy of that humble home. In many homes, the happy innocence and sacred beauty of a first-born infant is as the dayspring from on high, warming the hearts of the parents with gratitude to God, the Giver, and making them feel as if a new and blessed light had come into their lives, waking them to new and tender interests, and moving them to loving labors in the spirit of purest self-sacrifice. But all this each little child is only within the narrow limit of his own home. The wonderful thing about the child Jesus is that He is the Dayspring from on high to all homes, and that in an infinitely greater and higher degree than any other child is in his own home. He was the eternal Light not only of one home, but of all homes—the Dayspring from on high for every weary and darkened heart of the whole human race with which, in such wondrous grace, He was making Himself permanently one.

This striking name, the Dayspring from on High, impressively suggests the deep darkness of the world before Christ came and the heavenly light of knowledge and comfort and purity and hope which He brought. Isaiah wrote: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined—for unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the

government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of peace." Malachi wrote: "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings." John the Baptist referred to Him as "the true light." Jesus said: "I am the light of the world."

On the first Christmas morning the darkness of paganism was everywhere round Palestine; and the dark places of the earth were full of the habitations of cruelty. But with Christ came light--"the Dayspring from on High" to dispel this darkness, scatter cruelty, relieve the oppressed, and help the poor and needy. His coming was the doom of that most presumptuous dominion of man over man called slavery. Christ did not abolish it all at once, did not even war directly against it. He so taught men and so lived among them in the divine glory of His heavenly love, that in proportion as men caught the inspiration of this new life, and kindled in the heat of this divine radiance, slavery was utterly a doomed thing. It could not live in the light of Christ, but had to withdraw farther from it, just as the shadows do before the sunrise.

And then Christ did so much for the child as well as for the slave. Think of the terrible treatment of little children before Christ came, and even of the treatment they still receive in the dark places of the earth where He is still unknown.

But He took them in His arms and blessed them. He said: "Of such is the kingdom of heaven," and ever since the hearts of the world have been gradually growing more and more tender to the graces and the needs and the holy ministry both by and to the little children.

Then think of how much the advent of Christ has meant to womanhood, as well as to slaves and to children. Woman is no longer what she was so long, the mere servant or toy of man, but wherever the gospel of Christ is preached and wherever His spirit rules, she becomes the genuine companion of man, and is restored to her native dignity and to her true vocation.

Only when the light of day has come do we feel the depth of the darkness of night that has preceded it. Only in the full glory of the sun of divine grace are we able to understand the darkness of the night of woe that overhung mankind and endangered its existence. Neither the treats of the Old Testament law, nor the wrath of a holy God, can so effectively convince the sinful world of the depth of its guilt as does the grace and mercy of the Lord in Christ Jesus. Placed over against this shining background, the darkness of night which surrounds unredeemed humanity appears in all its hideous horrors, and it is impossible for us to appreciate the Christmas season without remembering what preceded the advent of Christ, the shadows of death and the sorrowful grief which weighed down the souls of men. Before Christ came, mankind was ignorant of the moral character of God, the purity of His law, the evil nature and dreadful consequences of sin, the true source of happiness, and the future state. Christ is the center of the world's history, and with Him was inaugurated a new dispensation and a new order of things. He is the central sun of the day of salvation. He has introduced into the world of sin the power of sanctification; He has brought to suffering man the strength of new health; He has given to souls without peace the peace that passeth all understanding.

The sun is the fountain of light to this lower world. Day by day it rises on us with its gladdening beams, and with the return of light is connected the sense of reviving power in ourselves; invigorated health and cheerfulness; renewed and willing application to appointed duties. God Himself has made it the ruler over the day. Christ is to the moral world what the sun is to the natural world; the source of life, and health, and motion. Day by day, He brings with Him spiritual health to those who are diseased in soul, comfort to those who mourn, rest to the weary and heavy-laden.

However, in order to understand fully the force of the rhetoric in this passage we must bear in mind one of the natural phenomena of those eastern regions. So pure is the atmosphere there that clouds in the sky are not usual except in the rainy season. There is no twilight, as we describe it, in those latitudes. The instant the day reaches its natural close, the sun seems to slide down the sky without any leave-taking. Just so when the dawn starts. Zacharias seizes this astonishing figure and turns it to account. For four centuries it had been dark--dark with sin, ignorance, oppression--and now in one excited instant of disclosure the Sun of Righteousness had risen with healing in His wings. No wonder his heart was full. No wonder his dumbness gave way and his glad voice lifted such a song. Zacharias looked at the manger cradle, and then he saw the dawn breaking over all the earth, and the words of the old prophet, "they that sat in darkness have seen a great light," echoed in his soul. His joy was set forth under the idea of the rising sun. "Dayspring" is defined as "the dawn," "the beginning of day," or "first appearance of light." By "dayspring" is meant the day-dawn, the coming of day after night, the herald of the rising sun, the change from darkness to light, the spring of the day. Christ is the only dayspring of light to the darkened soul.

1. Christ's coming was like the Dayspring in its Beauty.

There are few things in nature more beautiful than a lovely dawn. Its only rival is perhaps the sunset. Each has its own charm and merits. Yet each is different from the other in its colors and the difference of color is reflective of a difference of spirit. The colors of a morning sky are as a rule brighter than those of the evening. Homer speaks of the "rosy-fingered daughter of morn," and this is a true description. The colors of the sunset are usually deeper; rich crimsons and burning gold. They are often more beautiful than those of dawn. But they lack the spirit of wonder and hope which characterizes the dawn. They are pensive and even sad; reminiscent of a glory that has gone, prophetic of a darkness that is coming.

To both the dawn and the sunset the life of Christ may be likened. In His life there was both a beauty of the sunrise and the sunset. For beautiful as the rays of the Sun of Righteousness were when they shone forth in the zenith of His strength, they never shone out with such glory as when they set behind the blood-stained Hill of Calvary. But I am speaking today of the beauty of Christ's opening life. That beauty was like that of the morning, fresh and unexpected in its charm. He did not come as men expected. They looked for a conqueror. He came as an infant. And since His day childhood has taken on a new attractiveness and a new sacredness. Childhood has been elevated and glorified. Christ came with the beauty and hopefulness of a little child to this dark world and taught all men to see in His cradle the hopes of a new and better day for the human race. He was truly "the Dayspring from on high."

2. Christ's coming was like the Dayspring in its Quietness.

That is, it was very gentle in its approach. How quietly steals the light upon the Eastern sky! It comes quietly, so quietly that you can hardly tell when it has arrived. And such was the rising of the Sun of Righteousness. "He did not strive nor cry nor lift up His voice in the streets." "He was in the world and the world knew it not." The light was shining in the darkness for years before the world comprehended it.

3. Christ's coming was like the Dayspring in its Power.

His great work is now in progress, and He will not be discouraged nor fail in the accomplishment of His mighty task. Think of the vast transformation which Christ has already effected upon the whole framework of human society, in its sympathies, and in its charities, and in its labors. Think of the elevation of that spirit of mercy and compassion which we see working in numerous institutions for the sick, the blind, the deaf, the orphans, the widows— in short for every kind of disease and every distressed condition of life.

But, the coming of the "Dayspring from on High" brings us something better and deeper than even the alleviation of human misery and pain. It reveals God. It shows us His "heart of mercy." Christ comes to us by "the tender mercy of our God," and not only sheds a heavenly light upon our deep need, but what is far better gives us a great light upon the tender dispositions of God towards us, showing us the great hunger of His heart for the rescuing and the blessing of His wayward children. In Christ we feel that God actually becomes one with us, purifying our joys, bearing our sorrows, cleansing us from our sins. He died for our sins and reconciled us to God, and thus gives us the knowledge of our salvation.

He reveals truth. He shows things as they really are. He makes known what God is and what He requires of man. He also reveals man to himself, and shows him his sinfulness and helplessness and misery, and points out the way by which to pass from sin to salvation, or from death to life. By His holy example He reveals to us how we should serve God and man. He imparts strength to us. To those who are downcast and sorrowful He imparts hope, to those who are timid He gives confidence, and to those who are strong in faith He gives help to win even greater victories than any they have yet won. Jesus shed light upon sin, for He not only taught man what it was but how to get rid of it. He shed light upon sorrow, for He pointed to the love of God which was behind it and beyond it. He shed light on the mystery of death because He revealed it to be to those who love God but the dark avenue which leads to the many mansions beyond.

1. Christ came to give light.

What the sun is in the material world that Christ is to us in the spiritual world. He is the Author, the source of light. As the face of nature revives or withers according as the influence of the sun is increased or diminished, so the soul of man continues dead or is quickened according as the Sun of Righteousness withholds or imparts the invigorating rays. He hath visited our benighted world.

"The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin,

The light of the world is Jesus."

Christ illumines death as well as life. If life was dark before He came, how much more so was death that ever shadowed it. But the divine Dayspring has shed His blessed beams into the tomb also. He brought not only life but also immortality to light. He Himself died and rose again, so there is a great light of deathless hope upon the place where Jesus lay. We need no more guesses now about the after-life and the other world. We know that because He lives all who love Him shall live also in the power of an endless life over which death shall have no power, and that it is His will that where He is there we shall also be to behold His glory. How measureless a difference this makes in our thoughts about our holy dead, and also in our thoughts about our holy dead, and also in our thoughts about our own eternal prospect at this brief life's close. And all this we owe to Jesus Christ.

2. Christ came to guide us into the way of peace.

He came not only to reveal the goal to us but also to help us to reach it--to guide our feet, our wandering, wayward feet, which we could not direct aright, into the way of peace. He desires that we have peace with ourselves, with our fellowmen, and with God. We must ask that the Dayspring from on High may visit us, not only in the conspicuous affairs of the world, but in the unobserved region of our hearts and minds. We are disciples of a faith which counts all emotions of the heart and all energies of the intellect to be precious and immortal. It is the office of religion to lift the heavy curtain of sense and materialism, and grant us glimpses of those treasures which our deathless spirits crave.

We must not forget that, if we would call forth the latent goodness and loveliness of human hearts around us, we must first feel the sweet influence of God's Dayspring in ourselves. We must live in a sunny atmosphere, if we would impart sunshine to others. The shadows of this life are not all sent from heaven, as some would have us believe. We often make gloom for others by shutting the light out of our own lives. We are endowed with the tremendous power of creating and disseminating darkness, of casting a chilly spell over those whom Divine Light is waiting to bless. Side by side with this baneful power, we possess the blessed faculty of revealing new beauties in life's path, by shedding around us rays of light. By our influence we can turn gloom into glory. We may achieve but little perhaps; indeed it is doubtful whether the very greatest achievements are as splendid as they seem. But the cup of cold water given in the Master's name, the kind word spoken in the hour of need, the distasteful task performed willingly for an over-burdened brother--these are plain evidences that the "Dayspring from on High hath visited us." So should we give ourselves up to loving service, walking toward heaven.

Even in this Christmas season there are many who do not appreciate the great Gospel proclamation that the season brings with it, the message of salvation from on high, bringing deliverance and pardon to all who believe, joy and happiness to the world, and the assurance of eternal life to all believers.