

The Light

A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 1: 1-18

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Christmas Eve



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John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to [God's] heart, who has made him known.



Christmas Eve around the world is unique. No other celebration in any religious context seems to attract so much sentimentality. I read a news article one year about the Christmas Eve service in a large United Methodist Church in Dallas which was going to be broadcast live on network television. The pastor said that the question always asked of him is, "Will there be candles? Can we

light a candle? "Give them a candle," he said, "and they'll come out on Christmas Eve."

And it's true. There is something about a Christmas Eve service that requires a candle – or many candles. What is it? Why candles? Why light?

One Christmas Eve we were on our way home from our candlelight worship service – my mother, father, and I – I was probably 12 or 13. It was past midnight, it had snowed while we were at church so there was a nice covering of white on the ground, and there were no streetlights on that stretch of I95 through Lower Bucks County. It was dark except for our headlights reflecting off the new-fallen snow – maybe a few other cars were travelling along with us in the first moments of that Christmas morning.

My dad noticed a car pulled onto the shoulder of the road. A man was stooped in the dark beside the car, changing a flat tire. Inside the car was a woman and 2 small children peeking out the rear window. Dad pulled onto the shoulder and slowly crept up behind the car and the family.

"Dad, what are you doing? Should we get out and help?," I asked.

He shook his head. "No, it's fine. Just stay in the car and we'll let our lights shine on him so he can see what he's doing." So we sat there, motor running, heater keeping us warm. The man finished fixing his flat, threw the jack in the trunk, waved a gracious and appreciative "Merry Christmas" to us, and hopped into the driver's seat of his car. We waited until they pulled away, and then we followed on up that dark and snowy interstate on our way into another Christmas morning.

I have never forgotten that night. Probably 40 years ago now – yet something in it rings so powerfully for me. For that nameless family on that cold and snowy Christmas Eve, we were a "light

that shines in the darkness.” It’s the image that the author of John’s Gospel chose to tell the Christmas story – no shepherds or angels, no Mary and Joseph, no baby in a stable, no magi coming to visit, no threatening political power trying to kill the baby. Light, John’s Gospel says, “the light that has come into the world.”

I’m going to read the entire prologue to John’s Gospel in a few minutes as we see the light spread in the Sanctuary. But hear the first few verses reflecting John’s contrasting use of light and dark: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

It would have been very easy to drive on by that broken down car that night. It was late, we were tired, and we still had gifts to wrap – we could look the other way, we could merrily sing along with the radio, we could be afraid of strangers lurking around the corner. But that was not in my dad’s nature – so we didn’t pass by – we stopped. We stopped, I think, because we were guided by that light that shines in the darkness, that Light that we had just been surrounded by in worship that evening, that Light that all of our Gospels point us toward as we read of the birth of Jesus.

Luke’s story – “the glory of the Lord shone around” the shepherds when the angels sang to them. Matthew’s story – the magi learned of the birth of this wonderful child because of the star – “the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.”

John’s writer was the most emphatic about it. “The light of all people” has now entered this world. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The Prologue to

John’s Gospel, the first 18 verses of the first chapter, was probably an early church hymn, scholars tell us. It’s a beautiful, poetic reminder of the power of light over dark, the presence of God which overshadows any form of evil. It’s a simple yet substantial passage and that’s perhaps the mystery of it. During the middle Ages John’s Prologue was used as a benediction or blessing at the end of worship. It was read aloud to the very sick or the dying because of its presumed mystical message – it was thought to have healing power in its words. The sheer poetry of it – even in its English translation – speaks volumes to the world of what exactly the birth of Jesus means to this world.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ...

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ...

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a [parent’s] only [child], full of grace and truth.

That’s why we light candles on Christmas Eve ... That’s why we put lights on our houses ... That’s why we put lights on our trees! It’s not because it looks pretty or because it’s supposed to attract a certain jolly old elf to our home – it’s because we celebrate this night the birth of the Christ, the light that shines in the darkness – the light that shines through the darkness, any darkness that the world might through at us, this light shines through.

It is, in fact, one of the reasons that our Christmas celebration ended up in December rather than in the spring which, according to scripture would make more sense because the shepherds were outside watching their flocks. We celebrate in December, close to the Winter Solstice, literally the darkest day of the entire year – so we call on each other to not be afraid – to remember that the true light has come into the world in the form of the Christ and is still in the world which needs to give thanks for God’s eternal presence.

What we do each Christmas – tree lights, house lights, candlelight – it is all about that light that the darkness can never overcome.

A blanket of white, untouched snow covers a field. The temperature is so low that breath seems to freeze in front of the face. The full moon shines on the fresh whiteness so that it looks almost blue. Ahead is a split rail fence and beyond the fence a house. In the house is light – light that seems to emanate from all the windows – light that beacons – light that envelopes – light that blankets anyone who is near. For someone headed home for Christmas, that light is the light that shines in the darkness as he makes the journey across a thousand miles to find love and acceptance. That is what God’s light that shines in the darkness is to this world.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Christmas Eve in Kabul, Afghanistan. A soldier is at her post guarding US Marine barracks – alert yet wondering; secure but anxious; faithful to her post, yet lonely for a friend on this sacred night. Off in the darkness lit only by the stars, a light approaches – the beam of a flashlight swinging to and fro to the rhythm of footsteps. “Who is it?,” she calls out as protocol requires. “It’s me,” replies her sergeant who wasn’t due on rounds for another hour, “I thought you might need some coffee and a friendly face.” A light in the darkness – a light calling out even in the midst of

what could be an evil approach – a few moments together on Christmas Eve so far from home.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John has the message. Throughout the Gospel we find this contrast of light versus dark and what better place to start talking about it than right here in the presence of the One who readers thought to be the Christ, the Messiah who the prophets said would come to save. John’s Gospel is the last one written, so the newest one for us, sometime in the late first century. Paul, the earliest of Christian writers, says that Jesus became savior at his death and resurrection; Mark, the earliest Gospel, tells us that Jesus was known as Son of God first at his baptism; Matthew and Luke stretch a little farther and tell us they think he was Messiah at his birth; John’s Gospel, though, takes it to the extreme. Not only was Jesus the Christ while he was here, but he has been with God from the very beginning of all creation – the Christ is eternal and everlasting, the Christ was there at creation, the Christ is the light, the true light, the light of God that can never be extinguished.

We are about to symbolically spread that light around this room. From one single candle – the Christ Candle at the center of our Advent Wreath – from the Light that is at the center of our world – we are slowly but most certainly engulfed, embraced, enlightened, imbued with light flooding into the room and our lives. This light lights a path for us, it warms us and brightens our hearts, it reveals us one to another, to the lover beside us or to the stranger in our life.

As the light spreads, recall that what we do is not in the flame of the candle, but in the light that shines on the darkness. What we spread tonight is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Life, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God. We spread the Word, we share the Light.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

When you go home tonight, if you are like me, you will light your Christmas tree. As you do that, turn out the rest of the lights in the room and simply bask in the light that of that moment and recall that the Light is not in the electric bulb but in the true light which has come into the world, the Light that shines in the darkness, the light which can never be overcome. And in that light sings out the message of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all.”

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Peace to you all. In the name of the Christ, the Light that shines in the darkness – the light that is never overwhelmed by the darkness. Peace.

Amen.