



"The Light Shines in the Darkness"
Scripture – John 1:1-14
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 2, 2022

At Christmas, we relish and retell the details in Luke's story of the birth of Jesus. Emperor Augustus issues a decree that sends people scurrying all over Palestine. It compels Joseph and Mary to make an 80-mile trek to Bethlehem, and we picture the pregnant Mary struggling to walk and ride her way to their destination.

When they arrive, we visualize them taking shelter in a stable and bedding down in the straw with the animals. Mary gives birth to her firstborn son and lays him in a make-shift crib – the manger. You could probably tell the story better than I can.

Out in the fields, shepherds are watching over their sheep at night when an angel appears and announces the birth. It is good news of great joy because this child is the Messiah and the shepherds dash into town to witness the amazing moment.

We flip over to Matthew's gospel to pick up the detail of the Magi. Wise men from the East follow a star that leads them to Jesus. They bring gifts for the newborn king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Word of the birth reaches King Herod and he plots to end this child's life before he is old enough to walk.

With those vivid images still lingering in our minds and with Christmas hymns still echoing in our souls and Christmas lights not yet packed away, we turn to the Gospel of John to hear his take on how the story of Jesus begins. What do we discover? There are no angels, shepherds, or wise men; not even Mary and Joseph.

By comparison, John's gospel seems esoteric. Unless you realize that rather than sharing a story of what happened, John takes a stab at explaining the mystery of who Jesus is. Approaching John's prologue as prose is a non-starter. Rather than a narrative about a babe wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger, John provides a poem that points to the mystery of this child. He writes, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

Have you been following the news of the James Webb Space Telescope? It launched on Christmas morning seeking light in the darkness of space. It hopes to detect the light from the first galaxies in the early universe and to help us better understand the processes that led to the creation of the stars, the planets and of life.

The author of the Gospel of John wants to take us back even further than the James Webb Space Telescope can. He wants to take us back to the beginning of time because he envisions the relationship between Jesus and God not to have begun 2,000 years ago with the babe in Bethlehem, but having always existed.

And like the James Webb Space Telescope, he wants us to understand the light in the darkness. Not the literal light from billions of years ago that can be seen through this telescope and will be photographed, but rather he employs light as a metaphor. "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."

John uses the word *darkness* in two ways. Darkness represents suffering and evil – the hardships that rob life of its vitality. It also represents ignorance and misunderstanding – either an inability or an unwillingness to grasp the truth.

Jesus enlightens us by helping us better comprehend the nature of God and what imbues life with vitality. Further, Jesus gives us hope because he is victorious over the powers of darkness that rob us of the promise of better days to come.

When John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," he makes a powerful and positive affirmation. Although I suspect most of us wish the light would not only shine in the darkness, but would obliterate it!

Much of the time, do you feel as if darkness is winning? We are bombarded by stories of violence, crime, poverty, illness, injustice, and mean-spiritedness. It can lead us to believe that the darkness has mauled the light and is running a victory lap. We wish the light would do away with the darkness entirely, but that would rob us of our freedom, our choices would be an illusion, and life would be drained of meaning.

John chose symbolic speech to communicate the relationship between Jesus and God. John declares that the man known as Jesus of Nazareth provides our best glimpse of God. Through his teaching and his manner of living, he is our window into the character of God. And whether we recognize it or not, God is an eternal flame that burns in our hearts. That flame assures us that God is with us in the bleak episodes of life, God illumines our path through the shadowy maze of existence, and God ignites hope for a better day.

John knew that all was not right with the world. He lived under the oppressive occupation of the Romans and was exiled to a cave on the rocky island of Patmos. There was no doubt in his mind that darkness was a formidable force. But John also knew something else; something not always apparent. He knew that God is always with us and darkness will never extinguish the light of God.

When Rodger was in college, he became friends with Mark, a student from Alaska. Mark invited Rodger to spend the summer with him net fishing for salmon on his 34-foot fishing boat. It was backbreaking work, but if they did well, they could make a lot of money for college.

There were three of them on the boat. Mark was the captain, Ryan a friend who had grown up fishing with Mark, and Rodger who knew nothing about fishing for salmon in Alaska. He soon learned that they would set out this huge net in the water and wait for salmon to swim into it and then haul it in.

One night, they had thrown the net out into the ocean and it was well past midnight. It was Rodger's job to watch it and keep it taut while Mark and Ryan caught some sleep. Rodger remembers an idyllic scene: the sea was

gentle and there were more stars than he could count. Rodger could see the lights of other boats around them who also believed this was a good spot. Rodger was outside the cabin and weary. He struggled to keep his eyes open, but at some point, he fell asleep. That was the one thing he was not supposed to do.

An hour or two later, he woke up with a start. The boat was rocking and the stars had vanished because the weather had changed. He quickly realized he could not see any lights from other boats — which meant they had all left. He looked for the floats that held up the net. He couldn't see them because of the whitecaps on the ocean.

Suddenly, Mark, who is usually a laid-back guy, slammed open the door of the cabin and said, "Oh no! It's a Taku!" A Taku is the Tlingit word for 'great sudden wind,' and they were 20 miles off the coast in the Gulf of Alaska. Then Mark did something startling. He jumped back into the cabin, grabbed a huge knife and went to the bow of the boat where he cut the net free from the boat. He dashed back into the cabin, slammed the door shut, and revved up the engine. Rodger knew this was an emergency situation because that net cost several thousand dollars.

Rodger went to the door, but Mark had locked it. He started knocking, and asking, "Um, Mark, should I be out here or should I be in there with you and Ryan."

Mark opened the door and with one hand lifted Rodger over the threshold and brought him into the cabin, then slammed the door shut and locked it. Rodger saw terror in his eyes. The ocean was getting angrier and Mark got on the radio and start calling, "Mayday!"

Rodger remembers the howling wind and the water crashing against the windows of their little cabin. They would rise to the top of a wave and then slam down into its trough. When they were in the trough, all they could see was a wall of green surrounding them.

The violent storm seemed to go on for hours, and the whole time Mark was on the radio calling, "Mayday." Then, out of nowhere a huge trawler appeared. The captain of the trawler had responded to Mark's distress call. Later Rodger found out that the captain was asking for Mark's full name and Ryan's and Rodger's names because he didn't think they were going to make it, and he wanted to be able to report their names to the Coast Guard.

Mark kept talking to the captain, but refusing to give him their names. He kept telling the captain to shine his huge lights into the ocean. Each time they were on the crest of a wave, Mark would search for the light. Then he would turn their little boat toward it.

They would go deep into a trough and Mark would wait. Then when they would crest again, he would do the same thing. He would search for the light and then head for it. That was his one purpose and that is how they survived.¹

Waves of darkness are washing over our world. It is tempting to believe that there is nothing we can do but adapt to it. However, when we seek the light it kindles courage within us. We face the darkness with a bit less fear because we gain the assurance that we are on the side of what is right and true and good. We no longer despair that nothing can save us from the storm. We become confident that no effort is too small.

When we seek the light, we cut through the trivial and the distractions. The clutter is revealed for what it is and we reawake to what is precious and vital.

When we seek the light it also prompts us to take a longer view. While the present seems imprisoned with darkness, we perceive it will not last. Although we cannot discern the precise contours of the change that will come, we gain confidence that the future can be, will be different.

When we seek the light, we discover possibilities that were previously hidden from view. We perceive that hardships may become frontiers for new opportunities.

As we step out of 2021 and into 2022, I pray that each day we will remember to search for the light.

NOTE

1. Rodger Nishioka, "Resilience: Keeping the Central Things Central," April 26, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, as we begin a new year, we pray that we may never forget to search for the light that is Christ. He shows us the way, he points to the truth, and he exhibits the life you urge us to live.

In the coming months, we pray that we may know your abiding presence with us. When we face great difficulties, we pray for courage to face whatever comes. When our path is beset with obstacles, we pray for the will to overcome each crisis we encounter. When joy is fleeting, we pray for the determination not to allow hardships to make us hard. Grant us strength to persevere when challenges come our way, and when dark clouds hang heavy, never to lose sight of your light.

Loving God, we give special thanks for Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In his relentless pursuit of justice, in his welcoming love for all, and in his remarkably joyful spirit, he clearly exhibited Christ-like actions for us to emulate.

In the year to come, may both our hearts and our minds be open to epiphanies large and small that provide opportunities to draw closer to you and the life you dream for us to live. With our families, with our friends and neighbors, and with strangers, may we respond to pain with compassion, to frustration with encouragement, to betrayal with forgiveness, and to cruelty with kindness.

Generous God, we know that no one should go hungry while others throw away excess; no one should go without clothing while others build larger closets; and no one should be homeless while others live in mansions. As we march through the days of the coming year, we pray that we may nurture a benevolent spirit, because we who are abundantly blessed can be a blessing to others. When we are a blessing, joy and purpose and satisfaction have a way of showing up on our doorstep.

Now we focus our minds and unite our voices in praying the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.