



"The Light in the Darkness"

Scripture – John 1:1-9

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, December 31, 2023

A week ago, this chancel was brimming with angels, shepherds, animals, magi, and the holy family. We relived the Christmas story as narrated by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It's a beautiful and intriguing story we celebrate every year, and it prompts a spirit of goodwill and a longing for peace. Followers of Jesus have been recounting this story for centuries, and I suspect we will never tire of telling it.

But, why do we tell this story? There is nothing about the teachings of Jesus, nothing to illustrate a faithful life, nothing about resurrection. We tell this story for another reason. It is an attempt to express the mystery of how God was uniquely present in Jesus.

In the first few decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers wrestled with how they could communicate their sense that when they experienced Jesus, they experienced God. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, the One for whom people of faith had been longing for centuries, but the title Messiah was not fully adequate. Jesus was more than Messiah, and so they added a title: Son of God.

But that prompted a riddle: ***When and how*** did Jesus become the Son of God?

In the first and second centuries, several individuals took a crack at writing about the life of Jesus. As a result, there was a plethora of gospels. There was a Gospel of Thomas, a Gospel of Peter, a Gospel of Mary, and a Gospel of Judas among others.

However, when the books of the Bible were finally set, only four gospels made the cut – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As I mentioned in a recent sermon, the books of the Bible are not in chronological order. In the New Testament, the Letters of Paul are the earliest New Testament writings, and they are not lined up in the order Paul wrote them.

The four gospels are placed first presumably because they are essentially biographies of the life of Jesus. And it is interesting to see how the four writers wrestled with the riddle: when and how did Jesus become the Son of God?

The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four gospels, highlights the baptism of Jesus as the special moment when God's Spirit filled Jesus and he became God's son. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written 10- 15 years after Mark and they tell of a miraculous birth. Last Sunday night, we retold the heartwarming story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem where they encountered the inn with a "No vacancy" sign and were relegated to the stable. We cherish the nativity scene, the angel's announcement to the shepherds, and the Magi trekking for miles, guided by a star. The birth of Jesus announced that God is not a distant deity, but is as near to us as our breath.

The opening words of the Gospel of John jolt us into an entirely different sphere of thought. Not with a dove descending at his baptism and not with the story of his birth, but with compelling poetry that echoes the creation of the universe. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then switching metaphors, the writer declares that Jesus is "the Light that shines in the darkness."

I want us to pause and ponder this statement: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." What thoughts do those words evoke in your mind? Literally, we might think of striking a match to a candle in a dark room or turning on a flashlight when it's pitch black. However, we know that in today's passage, light and darkness are not intended to be understood literally, but rather as metaphors. So, when we use "dark" or "darkness" as a metaphor, what words or thoughts come to your mind? What are some things that darkness represents?

Despair – the feeling of hopelessness.

Meaninglessness – when you feel life has no purpose.

Grief – when you have lost a loved one.

Ignorance – when we do not understand something we say that we are in the dark.

War – when people are being killed and injured – especially women and children.

Conflict – when people are at odds with one another either verbally or physically.

Lies – when people seek to deceive.

Injustice – when people are not treated fairly.

Greed – when one becomes obsessed with wealth and material possessions.

Those notions represent much of the darkness and evil we must contend with. Switching gears, what words come to mind when we use "light" as a metaphor?

Hope – belief that a better day is ahead.

Faith – belief that God is Creator and life has a purpose and nothing can separate you from God.

Peace – when war and conflict are ended, or when turmoil in the soul turns to serenity.

Healing – when a grieving soul is mended.

Truth – when lies or ignorance are challenged by what is actually the case; not what someone wants to believe or propaganda – intentionally spreading information that is untrue and misleading.
Wisdom – when we have not only knowledge, but insight and understanding and sound judgment.
Justice – when people are treated fairly or oppressed people are liberated. Tonight, many African American congregations will observe Watch Night to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation becoming law. On January 1st 1863, all slaves in the Confederate States were proclaimed free. That was a moment in the history of our country when light shined in the darkness.

Although the four gospel writers have different ways of expressing it, each of them is proclaiming that we are not alone. God is with us.

To be clear, the gospel writers are not proclaiming that the world is as God intends for it to be, that evil has been swept away, that suffering has vanished, and justice has finally been established for all. Jesus was born in harsh times and his life was never easy. Poverty was widespread, justice was anemic, and a brutal foreign power occupied his country.

The Christian faith is realistic about the darkness in our world. Hardship, fear, and despair obscure the light, and can trick you into thinking that there is no meaning, no purpose, no justice, no truth, no hope.

The gospel writers drive a stake into that lie. Each one in his own way announces that we are not alone. God is with us when the wheels come off and life is a struggle. God is with us when we lose a loved one or lose our job. God is with us when our health takes a nose dive or we are treated unjustly. We never have to face the darkness alone, because God is with us. And that not only infuses us with grit to endure difficult times, but also hope for a better day. Even when we cannot envision it, a new day can still dawn.

When writer Frederick Buechner was a child, he suffered one of the worst fates any child can suffer – his father committed suicide. He says that when we claim that God is with us, it does not mean that God shuffles us around like pieces on a chess board. God is present not as the *cause* of all that happens, “but as the One who even in the hardest and most hair-raising events offers us the possibility of new life and healing.”

God is loving and merciful, and would never will a person’s suicide. Buechner says, “It was my father himself who willed it as the only way out available to him from a life that he had come to find unbearable. [God did not will his suicide] but God was present with my father...My faith as well as my prayer is that God was and continues to be present with my father in ways beyond my guessing.”

Then, Buechner talks about how God helped him to cope with and grow from his father’s death. He writes, “I can speak with some assurance of how God was present in that dark time for me in that I was not destroyed by it. I came out of it with scars to be sure, but also somehow the wiser and the stronger for it...Through the loss of my father, I learned something about how even tragedy can be a means of grace that I might never have come to understand in any other way.”¹

The author of the Gospel of John put it like this: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."

How do you handle hardships in life? When it feels as if your world is caving in, how do you respond? Cling to the belief that Christ is the light of the world who comes to us despite the darkness that envelops us.

Theologian Douglas John Hall writes, "You do not have to look for God in the sky, beyond the stars, in infinite light, in glory unimaginable. God is alongside you in the darkest place of your darkest night."²

The author of the Gospel of John knew in the depths of his being that all is not right with the world. There is too much pain, too much injustice, and too much suffering. He lived under the oppressive occupation of the Romans. He was arrested and exiled to a cave on the tiny island of Patmos. There was no doubt in his mind that darkness was a formidable force. But John also knew something else; something that is not always apparent. He knew that God is with us and that darkness will never extinguish the light.

NOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*.
2. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness*, (Academic Renewal Press, 2001), p.173.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, as we prepare to take our first steps into a new year, we pause to reflect on the past 12 months. We are grateful for special moments we savored with loved ones. We give thanks for birthdays and anniversaries we celebrated, and holidays we enjoyed. We are grateful for storms we weathered, fears we vanquished, and mountains we conquered. We breathe a sigh of relief over tests we passed and misfortunes we dodged. We also recall struggles we faced and people we lost; new people we met and friendships we formed. We are mindful of fresh insights we gained and opportunities we embraced.

Loving God, as we look back on the past 12 months, we also ask forgiveness for the times we fell short: for the times we encountered a need but turned away; for the times we lost our temper and spoke unkind words; for the times we refused to compromise and insisted on getting our own way; for the times we judged too harshly and failed to see the whole person; for the times we witnessed injustice but were too timid to raise our voice, for the times we clung to what was familiar when you urged us to take a risk.

Everlasting Lord, in the coming year, we pray that we will do a better job of responding in Christ-like ways. May we generate the will to respond with compassion to the needs we will encounter, the wisdom to hold our tongue rather than speaking toxic words, and the determination to slam on our mental brakes before rushing to criticize. May we be discontent with problems we can work to improve, and driven by an intrepid spirit to stand for a just cause.

Mighty God, the past year witnessed too much violence, discrimination, deceit, addiction, greed, mean-spiritedness, and self-centeredness. Surely one of the foremost ways we can combat such evil is to encourage people to develop a spiritual life that strives to recognize each person as your precious child and worthy of respect.

God of past, present and future, in the coming year we will encounter both hazards and opportunities. We will face temptations and discover roads to new adventures. We pray that we will dedicate ourselves to following the way of Jesus – the way of love and peace, so that we may experience the joy and hope of the life of faith.

Now we pray the prayer Jesus instructed 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.**