

John 1:1-14 (Longest Night)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 December 2016

Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 00] John chapter 1 verses 1 to 14 is found on page 886 in the Pew Bibles.

John chapter 1 beginning at verse 1. 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 were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Again, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through Him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

[1 : 12] He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Let us pray. Be our light in the darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.

For the love of your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Most of the scriptures that we have read and the songs that we have sung tonight have spoken of light shining in darkness.

Of course, Christmas is a season of light and joy and peace and fellowship. But it can also be a time of darkness, grief, unrest, and loneliness.

[2 : 39] Maybe your morning, the recent loss of a loved one, perhaps you came to recognize that up at the front, or simply reflected on that during this last few minutes. Maybe it's a more distant memory.

Someone dear to you, whom others may have forgotten, but their absence is still very fresh in your mind. Maybe you've experienced other kinds of losses in the last year.

Losing your financial stability. Losing your physical health. Losing your emotional strength. Losing a close friendship. Perhaps the cold weather and short days and long nights seem to take a toll on your soul as well as your body.

You know, it shouldn't be surprising that things that happen to our bodies also weigh on our souls.

And what goes on in our souls tends to manifest itself in our bodies in some way or another.

As human beings, God made us as a unity of body and soul. We're not angels, spiritual beings unaffected by enduring physical bodies.

[3 : 47] And we're not just animals. Physical creatures who may display God's wisdom in many ways, but who do not have a spiritual nature like we do.

Perhaps uniquely among all of God's creatures, our souls are deeply intertwined with our physical bodies. And so tonight I want to ask, what does the Word of God have to say to us when we walk in the darkness?

Whether that's physical or spiritual or relational. And from our readings tonight, I think we can say three things.

First, that God's Word acknowledges the reality of the darkness in which we walk. Our reading from Lamentations began with these words.

My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. I say my endurance has perished.

[4 : 49] So has my hope from the Lord. Remember my affliction and my wanderings. The wormwood and the gall. Wormwood and gall were extremely bitter and potent substances.

The words could sometimes refer to destructive poison and at other times to very bitter tasting medicine. This reading says peace, happiness, endurance, hope.

They're gone. Forgotten. They have perished. Affliction, wanderings, bitterness. Remembered. You know, in many places the Bible describes what it feels like to suffer. To grieve. To be in pain. The Bible doesn't speak in vague platitudes. It doesn't just restrict itself to expressions of positive thinking. It faces the emptiness and futility and apparent meaninglessness of life under the sun in this fallen world.

[5 : 59] The book of Lamentations is a series of poems lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and the horrors that it caused. The book of Job, if you read it, has long anguished speeches from a man whose health and livelihood and status and children were all taken from him in one catastrophic day.

Many of the Psalms were written by people crying out in pain. Groaning. Under the weight of guilt. Afflicted by enemies.

How long? Why? The Psalms bring these questions before God. The Bible acknowledges the reality of darkness in which we live.

Whether it's the darkness of loneliness and isolation. The darkness of ignorance and fear. The darkness of sin and strife.

Or the darkness of death and its dark shadow. The reading from Isaiah spoke of people walking in darkness. John spoke of the light coming into the darkness of this present age.

[7 : 18] And this is where we must begin. Acknowledging before God the reality of the darkness that we experience. Sometimes this feels scary.

And painful. Feelings of loneliness or hopelessness feel overwhelming. And so our instinct is to run away. To escape.

To numb ourselves. And feel nothing. Grief can feel like an open, festering wound. Ugly and off-putting to others who see it.

Our instinct sometimes is to stuff a band-aid on top of it. To hide it from public view. Acknowledging the darkness around us or within us.

Before God and others can feel like taking off that band-aid. And seeing the ugly pus and blood start oozing out. It's not always a pretty sight.

[8 : 19] Maybe you've tried to open up. And share some of your pain. And maybe other Christians have recoiled. Or even rebuked you. But God's word allows us.

Even summons us. To give voice to the reality. Of the darkness in which we dwell. To acknowledge our sorrow. To name our losses.

To speak about even that which brings us shame. And to bring that before God. That is the first step. Toward healing and hope.

To acknowledge the reality of the darkness. And God's word does that. God's word also warns us of dangers in the darkness.

This is the second point. If I say surely the darkness shall cover me. And the light around me shall be night.

[9 : 19] Even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day. For darkness is as light with you. In one sense walking through the darkness.

Of grief. Or pain. Or depression. Can eventually help us to see things. That we wouldn't see otherwise. Imagine if we suddenly had a power outage.

And all the lights in this building. And the surrounding neighborhood. Suddenly went off. At first. The darkness would seem blinding.

If you tried to walk. You'd probably trip over the pews. We'd trip over each other. Bump into the walls. You'd feel disoriented. But gradually.

Your eyes would begin to adjust. You learn to see in the darkness. You learn to function with much less light. Than you thought you needed. You begin to notice things.

[10 : 21] You might have otherwise ignored. Like the moonlight. Filtering through. The stained glass windows. Or if you stood outside. The stars in the sky.

Which normally we don't notice. Under the bright streetlights. In God's mercy. People who have suffered much. Can become deeply compassionate.

And humble. And perceptive. And sensitive to others. In ways that they never were before. They learn to see in new ways. You know.

Some of the songs that we've sung tonight. Come from people who suffered much. The song we sang to the tune of Greatest Thy Faithfulness. Is actually from a poem written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

On New Year's Day. Of 1945. In the concentration camp. Where he was imprisoned. The song I heard the bells on Christmas Day.

[11 : 24] Was written. In the middle of the American Civil War. On Christmas Day of 1863. By a man who had lost. One child in infancy. His wife had died.

Two years previously. When her dress caught on fire. He tried to put it out. And was so. Disfigured by the burns. That he wasn't able to attend her funeral.

And he had just received news. Earlier that month. That one of his sons. Who had gone off to fight in the Civil War. Had been paralyzed. So he wrote.

These songs. Were written by people. Who were walking through pain. And suffering. And seeking to give voice to that. And to. And to bring that before God.

And also to declare the hope. That they. Found in God. So walking in the darkness. Can sometimes help us see. Things that we wouldn't see otherwise. But walking in the darkness.

[12 : 22] Also has its dangers. People who have suffered much. Can also. Become self-pitying. Self-justifying. Seeing themselves.

Always as the victim. Never as the source of a problem. The suffering we have endured. And continue to endure. Can become our weapon. That we use to defend ourselves.

Against anyone who would challenge us. Or point out our flaws. Or call us to a costly. Path of obedience to God. You have no right to speak into my life.

You don't know how much I've suffered. We not only endure suffering. We can find a perverse satisfaction. In knowing that we have suffered. More than others.

And so we can justify. Our coping mechanisms. Our comforting addictions. Our short-sighted attempts. To soothe ourselves. In the midst of our pain.

[13 : 24] Perhaps we even sabotage. Good opportunities that come our way. Partly out of despair. Nothing really could. Get better for me.

And partly because we don't really want. Our life to get better. If I consciously receive. A generous gift that I didn't earn.

Or create. Then I have to let go of my identity. Of being an oppressed victim. And all the defenses. That provides. That provides. The gospel of John says.

Light has come into the darkness. But people love darkness instead of the light. Because their deeds were evil. It's right to acknowledge the reality of the darkness that we experience.

But the Bible warns us. Not to love the darkness. Not to make our final home there.

[14 : 23] Lamentations calls us to hope in the Lord. To wait for him. Seek him. Even if that means sitting alone in silence for a long time. Or enduring pain.

This is what the season of Advent leading up to Christmas. Is meant to teach us to do. To hope for what we do not yet see. To seek for what we have not yet found.

To wait for what we have not yet experienced. To live in the in between. Between God's promise that he will come to us. And our experience of its fulfillment.

So God's word acknowledges the reality of our darkness. It also warns us against dangers. That lurk in the darkness.

And finally. God's word proclaims that light has shined. Into the darkness. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

[15 : 27] Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness. On them the light has shown. Isaiah says. Light has dawned. Not light from within ourselves.

But light from outside ourselves. Has shined on us. And that is good news. That is good news. When we feel hopeless.

Lifeless. Used up. And inadequate. The message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is not that God helps those who help themselves. The message of the Bible is that God helps those who are helpless and hopeless and admit it.

His merciful light has come to shine on us in our darkness. The gospel of John picks up the same theme. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light. The true light. The true light. That gives light to everyone. Was coming into this dark world. And you might say.

[16:34] What exactly is that light? That he's talking about. That shines in the darkness. And John goes on to tell us. He says. The word became flesh.

And dwelt among us. The word that is the eternal God. The uncreated light. The one through whom all things were created.

Came to live with us. In flesh and blood. As a naked vulnerable baby. That's the message of Christmas.

That God has come to dwell with us. That he did not just shine on us from far off. When God came into the world.

He did not come as a shooting star. Or a bolt of lightning. Or a blazing fire. He came as a humble baby.

[17:37] Who grew up into a man. Who died on a cross. He came to meet us. Right where we are. He came to meet us.

In our pain. And grief. And loss. He came to meet us. In the finiteness of our understanding. When we simply say. I don't understand.

And I can't see the whole picture. He came to meet us. He became a finite human being. He came to meet us. In the ugliness of our self-pity.

And self-justification. And self-sabotage. In our feelings of hopelessness. And despair. Jesus came to bear our darkness.

For us and with us. In his life. And ultimately in his death on the cross. The Bible says. He was a man of sorrows. And well acquainted with grief.

[18:37] He was despised. And we esteemed him not. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way.

The Lord has laid on him. The iniquity of us all. Christ entered into our darkness. So that he might become.

Our everlasting. And unconquerable light. That he might lead us. Into the eternal light of God's presence. So that we might know.

Jesus said. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me. Will never walk. In utter darkness. But will have the light of life. Within them.

And that is the promise. Light has come. Into our darkness. God's word. Acknowledges the reality of the darkness. It warns us against the spiritual dangers.

[19:40] Of the darkness. But it said in Christ. The light. Has shined. Into our darkness. That we are not alone.

That in Christ. We have hope. That we have a savior. Who is with us. Every step of the way. From the deepest darkness. All the way.

To the morning light. Let us pray. Be our light. In the darkness.

Oh Lord. Lord. And in your great mercy. Defend us. From all perils. And dangers. Of the night. For the love of your only son.

Our savior. Jesus Christ. The light of the world. Amen. Amen. Amen.