

Christmas Eve 2020

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0:00] Well, good evening and Merry Christmas. It's a joy to gather this evening as we reflect back on that first Christmas night.

We read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke, and Luke gives some of the details about Jesus' birth, where it happened, when it happened, how it was announced to the group of shepherds watching over their sheep in the fields outside Bethlehem.

But I want to turn our attention to one verse from the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John doesn't actually give any of the details of Jesus' birth, but it begins by reflecting on the meaning of Jesus coming into the world.

And the verse I want to focus on is John chapter 1, verse 5, and it says this, You know, probably all of us could talk about darkness that we see around us in the world, whether it's the physical darkness of this time of year, the shorter days and longer nights, and how that affects us psychologically, the relational isolation we might have experienced this year, perhaps not being able to see or freely interact with some of those we love, the circumstances that may have disappointed us this year, the divisions and distrust we've seen in our society.

I think it's easy to sort of identify some of those things around us. But I think, if I'm honest with myself at least, this past year hasn't just shown me the darkness of the world around me.

[1:46] I think it's also shown some of the darkness within me. Perhaps that's true for you as well. Maybe, I feel like this year, the pressures around us have squeezed us like a tube of toothpaste, and what has come out of us hasn't always been the prettiest.

Whether it's anxiety and fear that have gripped us, or irritability and anger that have spilled out of us, or addictions, or unhealthy coping patterns that we've indulged, or despair and numbness that we've fallen into at times.

Let me just say, if you have seen the darkness within you in one of those ways or some other way this year, you're not crazy. You're not unusual.

You're just a human being, just like the rest of us. But here's the question, what can we turn to in the midst of the darkness in the world around us, and the darkness that we sometimes see inside us?

The Gospel of John talks about a light that shines in the darkness. And you might ask, well, what is that light that John is talking about?

[2:54] Well, the Gospel of John is part of the whole Bible. And if you read through the Bible, starting from the beginning, you will see this same pattern happening over and over.

And the pattern is the light of God's Word shining into the darkness of this world. You can see it right in the beginning, in the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1, the creation story.

It starts with saying that the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the face of the deep. It's a picture of emptiness and chaos. And the first thing God says is, let there be light.

And it says, and God saw that the light was good. And we know that John was actually thinking specifically about the creation story, echoing it, because the first word in John's Gospel, in the beginning, the first phrase is the same phrase that begins the book of Genesis.

And John says in chapter 1, verse 3, through him, through the Word of God himself, all things were made. So John is thinking all the way back to the creation story, and the picture of the beginning of everything, and God bringing things into being, and bringing light.

[4 : 08] But you know, we don't just see that pattern in the creation story. It continues throughout the Old Testament, throughout the Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament is full of stories of people who lived in dark times, and even whose hearts were full of darkness, fear, unbelief, rage, selfishness, lies.

But over and over, we see the light of God's Word shining into the darkness of this world. You know, you might think about the story of Abraham.

Abraham's one of the first major characters you'll encounter if you read the Bible. And when you meet Abraham, he's an old man. He's 75 years old. And he and his wife Sarah were childless.

And in those days, to be childless meant that you would have no legacy. There would be no one to remember you, no one to carry on the family name, no one to hold you in honor in future generations.

You would die, and you would be forgotten. And God came to Abraham one night, and God said, don't fear Abraham. I'm your shield. Your reward will be very great.

[5 : 15] And Abraham was having an honest moment with God, and Abraham said, but God, what will you give me? I'm old. I don't have any kids. I'm done. I've got a few more years, and then my name's going to go out of existence.

Everything I have is going to pass on to somebody else who isn't really even related to me. And God took him outside in the dark night, and God said, look up into the sky.

Look toward heaven and number the stars. If you're able to. That's, so shall your offspring be. I mean, Abraham could never have imagined that we would be sitting here tonight telling his story.

That billions of people throughout the world would look to him as their father in faith. You know, you can only see the stars when it's really dark. When the sun has gone down, and when you don't have electric lights blinding you by shining right on your face.

And in the same way, Abraham could only see the pure light of God's promises when other humanly initiated hopes in his life had faded. So that's one story of the light of God's word shining in the darkness of this world with Abraham.

[6 : 30] But if you keep reading in the Old Testament, in the middle of the Old Testament, you'll meet a woman named Hannah. And Hannah lived in one of the darkest times of Israel's history, the time of the judges.

And it was a time of corruption and chaos. Families were breaking apart. There were violent gangs preying on unsuspecting people. The entire nation was on the brink of civil war.

And Hannah went to the temple one day to pray, and the priest, Eli, went over to her and thought she was drunk. I mean, that's how bad things had gotten. 1 Samuel 3 says, The word of the Lord was rare in those days.

There was no frequent vision. The priest, Eli's eyesight, had begun to grow dim so that he could not see. It's all imagery of sort of growing spiritual darkness. But once again, if you read the story of Hannah, the light of God's word shone into the darkness.

And God heard Hannah's prayer, and God granted her a son who was the prophet Samuel. And late at night, again, late at night when Samuel lay down to sleep, God called out to him and spoke to him and gave him a word to proclaim to the people.

[7:39] And through Samuel, God raised up the greatest king of Israel, King David. And then if you go on, toward the end of the Old Testament, the people of Israel were again facing the darkness because the monarchy had deteriorated, and they were facing the darkness of impending exile.

The nation was falling apart because of their idolatry and their injustice. They were trying to fix things up in all the wrong ways, and it wasn't going to work. But through the prophet Isaiah, the light of God's word shone into the darkness of the world once again.

Isaiah looked beyond the impending exile to a time when things would be restored. And he said, there will be no more gloom for the one who was in anguish. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them the light has shined. And he goes on to say, for to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor.

Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. You see, throughout the Old Testament, we see the same pattern over and over. The light of God's word shining into the darkness of this world.

[8:53] And for Abraham, and for Hannah, and for Isaiah, God's word would be carried out. God's light would spread through the birth of a promised child. And so when John begins his gospel with these words, the light shines in the darkness.

And the darkness hasn't overcome it. He's building on that pattern established in the Old Testament. And he's proclaiming that the fulfillment of the pattern has arrived.

It's like the climax of a symphony. He says, the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. The word, like capital W, became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory. You see, all the glimmers of light that's shown on Abraham and on Hannah and on Isaiah in their day, all the little words of hope and promise that they heard from heaven had now come to their fruition and their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus.

Because in Jesus, something had happened that had never happened before in the history of the world. God himself had come on the scene.

[10:01] God himself had stepped into the world in the flesh of Jesus Christ, his son. God himself had come on the way.

God himself had come on the way.

We don't want the darkness of evil and death to simply triumph and wipe out all existence forever. We feel that desire. But, you know, John is talking about something more than human beings reaching out for transcendence.

John is saying that the transcendent God has actually taken hold of humanity. John is saying that the light of God's word has come into the darkness of this world in person.

And he's not just talking about an abstract principle or an undefined energy pervading the universe. He's not just expressing a wish. Right? Many of us have a wish. Hopefully 2021 will be better than 2020.

[11:47] Right? I certainly hope that's the case. We'll all feel better if it is. But when John talks about the eternal word of God taking on mortal human flesh, he's not just talking about a wish that circumstances will improve.

He's saying that something has happened that has never happened before. He's talking about God himself becoming a real person. A real human being who walked on the earth who people could hear and talk to and touch and see.

A person who we can know and be known by. Who is the word of God incarnate, Jesus. You see, according to the Bible, God didn't just visit this world in a metaphorical sense.

Or as we might say today, God did not just have a virtual visit with us. While really sitting up in heaven and keeping a safe distance.

Right? The Son of God came into this dark and broken world in person, in flesh, and in blood. He took hold of all that is ours. So that now and forever we could enjoy and be connected to all that is his.

[13:04] You know, I think almost all of us have become more adept at doing things virtually this year. Right? And virtual technology, let me just be clear. Virtual technology can be a great blessing. It's a resource that was not available to anyone else in the history of the world that was dealing with the pandemic.

That option, it allows us to stay connected in some meaningful ways, even when we're not physically together. So we should make use of that for all the good that it can give us.

But for all the blessings of virtual technology, we all know that some kinds of human connection can only happen fully in person.

And so all the letters and all the cards and all the phone calls and all the video chats only increase our longing to see the people we love in person, face to face, without inhibitions.

And in some ways, that's a little bit of the situation that God's people were in throughout the Old Testament. Glimpsing the true light from afar. Hearing from a distance the word of God.

[14:07] Longing for the day when that word, when the God who is speaking to them would appear among them in person. And John says that day came.

That day has come when Jesus came into the world. He came into the world in person. The light of God's word shone into the darkness. And Jesus would later say, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life in them. You see, the darkness, all the darkness of this world, and all the darkness in human hearts, has not and will not overcome the light of God's word.

And that is a statement of triumph. All the darkness of the world and its systems, all the darkness in human hearts, cannot extinguish or suppress or take control of the light that shines in Jesus Christ.

You know, if you read on in the Gospels, beyond the first chapters of them, the story continues. The stories all begin with Jesus coming into the world, and they all go on to tell of Jesus teaching and healing and liberating and reconciling power during his earthly ministry.

[15:22] But then they all tell of a day when the darkness seemed to triumph, when the Son of God was nailed to a cross, when the powers of evil and death seemed to triumph once and for all.

But then all the Gospels tell that contrary to all of his followers' expectations, three days later Jesus came back to life again. His followers went to visit the tomb where he was laid, and they found it empty.

And they couldn't figure out what had happened. They thought someone had taken away his body. And then to their great surprise and shock and disbelief, they encountered the living, risen Lord Jesus physically.

And even though many of them doubted it and couldn't believe it at first, they were convinced. And they proclaimed this message.

The light has shined into the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it. Now, Jesus isn't here physically anymore, of course, but before he ascended back into heaven, he promised to send his life-giving spirit, his very own presence, to shine in everyone who trusts in him.

[16 : 45] And he promised to one day return so that we would all see him face to face in glory. That's the story of the Christian Gospel in a nutshell. In the person of Jesus Christ, the light of God's word has shone into the darkness of this world, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Now, what do we do with that message? Let me close by giving a couple of challenges and a couple of invitations. First, let me speak to you.

If you're not a follower of Jesus, maybe you're here for the first time tonight, or just listening in, let me challenge you. What kind of light are you clinging to in the midst of this dark world?

You know, I think it's easier to point out the darkness around us, in our circumstances, or in our society. It takes a little more courage and humility to look inside and recognize the darkness within each of us.

But what kind of light, what kind of hope are you holding onto this winter? You know, when we really face the darkness of this world and the darkness in our hearts, we need something much more than a mere wish that hopefully next year will be a little better.

[18 : 06] So let me challenge you. What is the light or hope that you are clinging to? But let me also invite you to consider the Christian story. You know, you can read through one of the New Testament gospels for yourself.

If you don't have a Bible, we have plenty of extras here. Just ask me or any of us here. We'd be glad to get you one. If you'd like to read it for yourself, you can read it online.

Or you can go to our website. There's a section called How Can I Know God? There's links to talks you can listen to and things you can read, things that will help you explore these questions thoughtfully and intentionally.

Or talk to somebody. Talk to somebody who invited you or who's with you here. But second, let me also give a challenge and an invitation to those of us who do claim to be followers of Jesus, who have identified with him.

Here's the challenge, a question for us to think about. Where have you seen the light of Christ shining into the darkness of this past year?

[19 : 13] You know, I think it's easy to look back on this year and just focus on the disappointments and the negative aspects and the hurts and the challenges. But John says, the darkness has not overcome the light of Christ.

And that was true back then in Jesus' life and death and resurrection. And that is still true today in the life of anyone who is looking to him. We have a reason to rejoice because the darkness of this world has not and will not overcome the light of Christ himself.

So perhaps over the next week, as the year comes to a close, look back and ask this question, where have I seen the light of Christ shining in the midst of this year?

But finally, an invitation to those of us who believe in Christ. Let the light of Christ's presence dwell in you and shine through you.

In a minute or two, we're going to continue a tradition that we've had for the last few years at Trinity and that Christians throughout the world have done to look back on the birth of Christ and celebrate it together.

[20:26] We're going to light candles as we sing Silent Night. And as we light the candles, as we hold them and sing, and as we remember how the light of Christ has come to us, let's pray that his light would shine through us into this world.

Let's pray. God, we thank you that you have not left us alone to fend for ourselves in the darkness of this world and even in the darkness of our own souls.

Thank you that you have not left us to merely reach out blindly for you, wishing and hoping.

Thank you that you have come to us. Thank you that, in Jesus, you have taken hold of us. You have taken on our human nature. You have had compassion upon us in our brokenness and in our afflictions.

Lord, thank you that you have taken the initiative to reveal yourself to us. We pray that you would show yourself to us. Lord, whether it's for the first time or whether it's with a renewed desire to seek after you.

[21:52] Lord, we pray that your light would continue to shine through your word into our own darkness and through us into the darkness of the world around us.

That your hope and your truth and your mercy and your grace would be evident. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.