

## The Light Shines in the Darkness

Sterling UMC  
December 24, 2011  
John 1:1-14

As we gather this evening I have a simple question for you. Why are you here? Why have you come? What got you out tonight? And I think I know the answer. I think the answer is that we all believe that there must be something more to Christmas than what we're going to find under the tree tomorrow.

And I mean that's exciting; it's a lot of fun to open up all the presents and to see what's in the stockings. And you know it all points towards something really bigger than that. And I think we know that. I think you came when there was probably something else you could have been doing because you're yearning for something more from Christmas than what's under the tree.

I don't know about you but some of my most vivid and special memories from my childhood was getting up on Christmas morning and coming in to see all the loot, all the toys that Santa had left for me and my sister under the tree. And it was so exciting. But you know what, I'm also pretty sure that 40 years ago when I was just a little fellow that I didn't think Christmas was about anything more than just what was under the tree. It was about Santa Claus, and reindeer, and Frosty the Snowman and toys.

But you know, every year that I have lived I have a deeper yearning for something more. I have a longing and a hope that there's more to it than that. And I'm guessing you do too.

And so tonight we're going to turn to the Christmas story as it is told by the Gospel writer John. Usually I preach from Matthew's gospel or Luke's gospel. They tell the traditional story with angels and shepherds and wise men and stars and the baby Jesus in the manger. But John doesn't tell the Christmas story that way. So tonight as we ponder the real meaning of Christmas I thought maybe we should turn to the gospel where the writer intended primarily to focus on the meaning as he understood it. You heard it read a moment ago. Nestled in the midst all of those wonderful words we read that, "In Him was life and the life was the LIGHT of all people. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Light is such an important part of what we do in celebrating Christmas. We hang Christmas lights because they point to the light of Christ. We celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> for this reason. You probably know that. When the early Christians decided to celebrate his birth, and they didn't have a specific date so they decided to pick a date. And the date they picked was designed to communicate what was happening in Christmas. They picked the winter solstice. Now you remember what happens in the winter solstice, don't you? Beginning in the summertime, once we hit a certain point in the summer the days get shorter and the nights get longer, until we hit the winter solstice. And at the winter solstice everything

changes again, from that point on daylight gets greater and nighttime shrinks. The darkness recedes and the light takes over. And the early Christians said, "What better time to celebrate the birth of Christ than when we can see the gospel played out in the world around us as the daylight gets longer we remember that He is the Light of the World and the darkness could not overcome it.

So what does it mean for Jesus to be the Light of the World? I'd suggest four things to you. It means much more than this. But four for tonight's purposes.

The first has to do with the name that Matthew gave to Jesus. He said His name would be called Emmanuel. Emmanuel, it's a Hebrew word. It means God is with us. Part of the meaning of Christmas, Christ being the Light of the World, is that He was a word from God to say that God is always with us. God took on flesh and walked among us on this planet to communicate to human beings that you are not alone and God has not abandoned or forgotten you, that God is with you and God walks with you so you don't have to be afraid.

Maybe tonight you feel like you have lost your way, that you are groping about in the darkness, that the darkness of life is about to engulf you, to swallow you up, and that you are all alone. Well I have good news for you, just when the world most needed God's light, a babe was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Jesus Christ the Light of the World has penetrated that darkness. God became flesh in Jesus and dwelt among us so that we could see that he has not forgotten us, to let us know that He is always near.

The second gift of Christmas: The way in which Christ is the light for us has to do with the name that the angel gave Joseph to call the child. The angel said to Joseph when Joseph found out that Mary was with child, "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. And she shall give birth to a son and you shall call his name Jesus (in Hebrew Joshua which means, "God saves") for He will save his people from their sins."

You remember that the angels announced to the shepherds in Luke's gospel saying, "Behold we bring you good news of great joy for all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Now to really appreciate the fact that born in Bethlehem was a Savior, that Jesus is the Savior, to fully appreciate that, you have to understand that you need to be saved. Now by that I don't mean whatever tapes play in your mind when you think about people asking you if you are saved. Saved means to be delivered. And in the midst of this understanding of being saved or delivered it helps us remember the struggle we have with light and darkness in our lives, in our world.

The darkness in our lives is sometimes despair, sometimes depression, sometimes doubt or emptiness. Sometimes its fear. He comes to save us from those things. Sometimes we struggle with the darkness of temptation, to do the things we know we shouldn't do, or the darkness of not doing the things we know we should do. We give into the darkness instead of living in the light. This struggle in our lives is one we always face.

Jesus came to save us from ourselves. To save us from taking the path in which we find ourselves in trouble, separated from God and hurting other people, hurting ourselves. He came to save us; he came to show us the right path to take. But He also came to deliver us when we have taken the wrong path.

As a pastor for nearly 20 years I've been with a lot of people who have taken the wrong path. I've sat with people in my office as they've sobbed and they've talked about the decisions they had made and the hurt they had caused wondering if there was any way of salvaging their families or their marriages. People who had taken a path of darkness. And in every case having the chance to say to them, "The gospel was for sinners." The power of the gospel, the good news of Jesus isn't that you're all terrible people and God wants to send you to hell. The good news of the gospel is that God knows that we do terrible things and he loves us still. And he longs to save us and deliver us.

So God took the initiative to send his Son Jesus to save the world. He sent him to give himself for us when we weren't even asking for it. And so Christ came to be our Savior, to show us a different way, to call us to different way, to suffer for us the price that we might have paid otherwise. To take upon himself the sin of the world and then to give us grace and mercy. And that's part of the gift of Christmas.

Then we remember the third of the gifts of Christmas. And it's nestled in this phrase that John has in his telling of the Christmas story when he says, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it." Interesting phrase. In his telling of the Christmas story he's pointing toward Easter. He's pointing to the fact that there came a time when the child who was born in Bethlehem would be crucified, dead, and buried. He would be tortured by human beings. He would be nailed to a cross. He would be taken down and laid in the grave. But that was not the end of the story. It appeared at that moment that darkness had overcome the light, that Jesus had been defeated once and for all. His disciples believed that. Everyone believed that. And part of what this points to is there are moments in our lives where it feels to us like darkness has won and that there is no way that the light can come back. You've felt that, haven't you in your life? Some of you have been looking for jobs in this last year and in the midst of that discouragement you've interviewed again and again. And you begin to think, nobody is ever going to hire me again." And when you start to believe that you start to feel that darkness.

Some of you are in marriages that have been in great turmoil. And you begin to think we can never fall in love again. We will never feel what we once felt. We're destined to have this loveless marriage for the rest of our lives. You begin to believe that darkness has overcome the light. In a hundred different situations in your life. Moments when you're depressed, and in the midst of depression what's most frightening is the fact that you begin to think, "You know I'll never feel joy again in my life."

But here's the thing, on the third day, Jesus rose from the grave. The darkness cannot overcome the light. And in the end that is true not only in Jesus' death and resurrection, it's true in your life. The darkness will never be the final word. The place that you are

walking through right now that it seems hopeless; it's not the last thing that will happen in your life. The worst thing is never the last thing. And the dark word is never the final word. So Jesus' birth and His death and resurrection point us to the fact that there is always hope.

Listen, no matter what your situation, there is always hope. If you are here tonight and you feel joyless, your hopeless, there is always hope with God. And I don't know what it's going to look like, I don't know how it's going to turn around but you trust in God and you hold on tight in the middle of the dark seasons and you'll find somehow, some way there'll be hope again, there'll be joy again, there'll be light again because the darkness cannot overcome the light.

And that takes us to the forth gift of Christmas, and that's the love of God. You see Christmas is really a love story. It's a love story about a God who has an extravagant love for human beings. He rules over the entire cosmos and yet on this little planet He's placed creatures that were created in His image that He considers children. And he loves us. He knows your name and he knows everything about you. He knows your story. He knows you at your best and worst and He loves you still. Jesus came to "inflesh" that love so that we might feel it, know it, experience it. He came in his suffering and death on the cross to show us the price God was willing to pay to give you His love; so that as John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life."

Do you understand that God loves you? Sometimes we walk away from the love of God and He stands waiting for us to come back; hoping we will. That's the story of the prodigal son and the father who waits for his child to come back. He yearns for us to come back home because He loves us.

Now those are the gifts of Christmas, at least a few, if you'll unwrap them. But here's the last thing I'd want you to know about Christmas. The manger, where the Word became flesh and the light pierced the darkness, is not just about God's gifts to you, but God's mission for you.

Jesus said this to His disciples after they had seen the light in Him; they had experienced the love of God in him, He said to them, "Listen. Here's your mission. You are the light of the world too. Let your light so shine before others that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." He said, "Your mission is to love God with everything that is within you. But it is also to love your neighbor as yourself, and your neighbor is anybody who is in need of that love." The manger comes with a mission.

We receive the light of Christ in our lives, but then we're called once we have the light to go and take it to others. To incarnate His love, His grace, His mercy, His presence for other people. What does that look like?

Well I think about some of the examples we've seen around here this year.

Examples:

I think about the 92 of you who went this summer and built a home through Habitat for Humanity. Love looks like a wall, a roof, a house in Loudoun, Canton, Beaver Falls.

You know what? Love looks like a backpack to the children at Rolling Ridge Elementary School.

Love looks like a pair of flip flops to a child in Jamaica.

Do you understand how this works? Christmas is a mission from God for you. I'm pretty sure when I was 5 or 6 years old I didn't understand any of this. But you know the longer I live the more I yearn for something more from Christmas than what's underneath the tree.

Here's my invitation: Some of you here in this room tonight come every year for candlelight Christmas Eve with us. And we're really glad you come. Maybe the only time all year you come to church, and we want to thank you for coming. But I recognize that maybe you're sitting there and you're probably going, "Really? Come on, really? The shepherds, the wise men, and the angels, and the baby Jesus. Really?"

So I want to ask you a question. What if it was true? What if it was true that there is a God who knows you by name, and that God really does love you? How would it change your life? What if it was true that He is always with you and that you're never alone? What would that mean? What if it was true that he came to save you from yourself and from your sin and that He is the God of the second chance? What if it was true that there was always hope? And you know what John says in his gospel? It is true! And my invitation to you is simply to believe and to receive the gift of Christmas.