

“Jesus: Word Made Flesh, Light of the World”

December 20, 2020

Incarnation series - 4th Sunday of Advent – Livestream

Oh, Christmas lights. For me, decorating requires that *Christmas Vacation* is playing in the background so that I can sing “Joy to the World” along with Clark Griswold when he premieres his over-the-top light display. Perhaps you’ve seen it at least once this year. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Or maybe you’re a fan of Buddy the Elf’s winter wonderland display that “wows” everyone in the department store. **(SHOW SLIDE)**

It seems this is the year for lights. I feel like more homes are adorned with lights and decorations than ever before – or maybe I’m just noticing them more. Maybe I’m yearning for the light in the midst of what’s been such a solemn and gloomy time. It’s something to brighten the season. And I find myself lighting candles more than usual. There’s something so peaceful and powerful about that small flame burning.

I remember luminaries set up along the sidewalk at my church every Christmas Eve. They were small bags filled with sand with a candle inside, and I always wondered how they didn’t catch on fire. These bags with a small light led the way into the building where we would worship together and welcome the Christ child. And I know for many of us, lighting small candles on Christmas Eve is an important moment of the season. It has to be done, or it doesn’t feel right. So you can join me outside on Christmas Eve at 10:00 p.m. for time to sing and light candles – no matter the weather!

This year is different, but many of you lit a candle and passed the light of Christ – and recorded it. Some of you will gather outside this Thursday night to pass the light to one another. It will be different, but it’s a poignant part of the story and our understanding of what happens at Christmas – why lighting even one small candle matters.

The Gospel of John has been called the “Gospel of light” by some. One early church father called John the “spiritual Gospel.” John is different than Matthew or Luke. Both of them give accounts of Jesus’ background and birth story. Between them, we get Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and angels and magi and Bethlehem and the manger – the story that’s been a part of Christmas pageants forever. (By the way, Mark starts with John the Baptist who prepares the way for grown-up Jesus – more on than in January with our next series.)

But John doesn’t give us any of what we usually call “the Christmas story.” Instead, John gives us Word and light. His telling of God’s story is mysterious and glorious – and sometimes confusing. John says that Jesus makes God fully known to us. John spends time considering the Incarnation - God chooses to be with us in a new way.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth. This is the mystery of the Incarnation. This is God’s grace to us. This is where heaven and earth come together. Put another way that may connect with you and me: “Jesus is God’s

selfie.” Now maybe that’s a little too cliché, but you get the idea. Incarnation means that God dwells with us.

John recalls the words of Genesis “in the beginning” – God speaks and it is. Jesus is the Word of God – with God from the beginning and the full revelation of God to us. Pastor Adam Hamilton writes, Jesus “incarnates (puts flesh on) the wisdom, reasoning, mind, and heart of God.”

God comes in Jesus to show us who God is. God comes in Jesus to be with us and calls us to walk with him in the light of love. God shows love in Jesus – compassion for the sick, mercy for the sinner, instruction to know how to follow God. God gives himself for us when Jesus dies on the cross in sacrificial love – agape love – and gives us new life and hope through his resurrection.

Eboni Marshall-Turman, a theologian, said in an interview this week, “God is proximate to us.” God comes close to us, and God stays close to us. That’s where she finds the hope in this moment – that God understands our human predicament – every aspect of it. God is vulnerable to love that much. And she said that even despite the presence of evil, even in the uncertainty we find ourselves in, we celebrate that God comes to be with us.

Tomorrow is the longest night of the year. And it’s also the precise time when we’ll experience “the Great Conjunction” between Jupiter and Saturn. Some say this is the same phenomenon that the magi followed as they sought a new king – the star of Bethlehem. There’s some disagreement about how often it happens, but it’s hundreds of years between occurrences. It’s a big deal. It reminds us of the place of light in Jesus’ story.

As I was reading about light and darkness, I realized something important. Perhaps we’ve thought about light and darkness as opposites, but that’s not really the case (at least according to a more scientific definition). I even asked someone I live with who knows about lumens and the physics of light. Darkness is not the opposite of light, but the absence of light. So then I read John’s word a bit differently: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* Light fills darkness.

After my dad died, as my family and I sat together and shared memories, my sister remembered how my dad would always walk with her after they had done the chores in the barn at night. I grew up on a dairy farm in the country. It was dark at night – not a lot of ambient light. My dad knew that my sister was afraid of the dark, so he would hold her hand as they walked together safely into the house. It was something she could count on each night. She wasn’t alone.

My sister isn’t alone. Many of us don’t like the dark. We can’t navigate clearly. It’s unknown. It’s confusing. It’s unclear. And I wonder if that’s why John uses the image of light – because all of us get it. On the face of it, darkness isn’t bad. In the Genesis creation story, God separates light from darkness. God doesn’t say one is better than the other.

However, we also read the imagery of light and darkness throughout Scripture, and many times, darkness is used to describe our inward, moral struggles to do what's right and stay on the path that leads to life. Darkness is also used as an image for our situational struggles like grief, despair, sadness, or loneliness. Maybe we've experienced it ourselves and used that expression – being “in a dark place.”

Light – the light of God's presence and love – is the answer to our struggles. When John says that Jesus is the Light shining in the darkness, it is an image of God breaking in to help us and guide us.

Many of us are seeking hope and help, and maybe it seems strange that we'd put our hope in a baby born so many years ago. Maybe it's odd that we trust in God's presence in the most unexpected of places. I invite you to watch this video called “A Great Light.” You'll hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, but pay close attention to how these children prepare for the arrival of a special guest. This is a vivid depiction of what Christmas is all about: **SHOW MEDIA: A Great Light**

Did you notice? The kids washed up, dressed up, rolled out the carpet, and waited with smiles and flowers for their guest. And when he showed up, he wasn't what they expected. He was like them, but maybe they thought he was supposed to be different.

Maybe that's our struggle, too. Everything about Jesus is so unexpected. He comes to us – to be with us and to be one of us. And did you notice? This one who came brought the light, turned it on, and took on their burdens. He healed them. He carried their heavy load.

Friends, that's the Good News of Christmas – God's love is so wide and deep and real. God is with us. God knows our needs. God carries our burdens. God ultimately brings healing and hope.

Living our faith with new energy, new excitement, and new enthusiasm is crucial in a time when there are so many people hurting. We don't have to look far to see people in pain, and we need to claim our call to fight against hate, injustice, oppression, and violence in the world.

Jesus is the Light of the World. But he also calls his followers to be light. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, **(SHOW SLIDE)**

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Just like we're called to be Emmanuel for others, we are light-bearers. We bear or incarnate Jesus' light. We reflect it. We show it. We share it.

This week, I was talking with Jeff Verry, who told me a story about his daughter,

Lillian, who is seven. She gets this concept. There are times when she'll say, "Daddy, can we do that thing where the light from one little candle chases away all the darkness?"

SHOW SLIDE: Lillian with candle

Lillian and all of us are like those luminaries – offering even a little light for the sake of others. We are God's way of addressing darkness – of illuminating darkness and dispelling it. We are called to offer more light, more hope, more love, which brings transformation of the world.

So the challenging question is: are you bringing more light? Am I bringing more light? Perhaps it would help to think about someone who shared the light of Christ with you – someone who offered you hope, comfort, and love. What are we doing where we are to bring light – to bear light?

Karen Knopf wrote this short post on Facebook this week: "I posted this solar light lamp next to mom's monument a few days ago. I drove by there days later when it was dark out, and there way in the back was the light shining." **SHOW SLIDE:** Karen's mother's gravestone

It didn't escape me that in a place meant for burial, the light of Christ shines brightly in the lives of the saints. The light is powerful. The light endures. The light illumines and reminds us of our call to bear light.

John offers some of the most powerful words in Scripture: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.* Nothing can overcome the power of light. Jesus – Light of the World. All of us – called to be light. May we shine brightly in the name of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD'S PRAYER