

The Light and The Dark

Good evening, New Hope. Have you ever paused to consider the number of times we worship in the darkness? As a young person growing up in a non-Methodist church, I held to a very simplistic view that nothing good happened at night, that darkness was bad, and the light was good. I'm not sure where that idea came from. God is the same, whether we find ourselves in the light, or in the darkness.

Just before COVID, Kendra read a book about the effects of "blue light," basically from computer and smartphone screens on the human brain. It turns out, that human beings need a period of darkness each day to reset the brain and stay healthy. That's a shocker, isn't it? Of course, most people sleep during the dark hours.

I bring all this up, because, from my view as your pastor, some of the holiest experiences of the liturgical year happen in the dark. Candlelight Christmas Eve services are at the top of the list. There's also Ash Wednesday to start the Lenten season, Maundy Thursday to mark the betrayal of our Lord, Good Friday, to mark His death and the darkness that covered the whole world while He was dying, and then there's the Easter Vigil – the early morning fire while it's still dark – which reminds us that the empty tomb in the garden will soon display Christ's victory over sin and death. Our God does amazing things in the darkness, as well as the light!

Jesus in the House of Bread

And so, on this most holy night, we come together once again to remember the coming of our Savior to the manger at Bethlehem. In our first Gospel lesson this evening, we heard Luke's account of the Incarnation. He opens with the historical context of Caesar's decree. Mary and Joseph, in obedience to the decree, travel to Bethlehem – a town known for being the stomping ground of Israel's greatest king, King David. Bethlehem, in their language, literally meant, "House of Bread." In the quiet of the night, the divine unfolds in the ordinary – Mary gives birth to the Son of God, and lays Him in a manger – a feeding trough in a humble stable.

Luke introduces us to the shepherds – in those days, humble and marginalized people – who become the recipients of the Good News. An angel tells them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in

cloths and lying in a manger,” (Luke 2:10-12). The shepherds – representative of the lowly and the forgotten – decide to go and see this miraculous event. They go up to Bethlehem – to the “House of Bread” – and see the Baby wrapped in rags, in the manger. They knew what this meant – seeing the Infant Jesus this way. They did the same thing when their ewes gave birth to unblemished lambs to be used at Passover for an atoning sacrifice. “The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me,’” (1 Cor. 11:23-24). Jesus would grow up to become the atoning sacrifice for us, and for the whole world.

The manger and strips of cloth He was wrapped in provide a reminder that when Christ came down, He came in absolute poverty. Our Lord is a living, breathing testimonial of the inclusive, unconditional nature of God’s love – making salvation available to anyone, without regard to race, social or economic status, or gender. He came down in humility and vulnerability – and chooses the ordinary, and unlikely to do the extraordinary and impossible.

Jesus, Light of the World

In contrast to Luke’s narrative, the Gospel of John offers a broad view of how the whole creation is connected – and changed – by the Incarnation. John’s prologue opens with an amazing statement. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning,” (John 1:1-2). In this case, we’re able to recognize that Jesus is the eternal Word, coexisting with God from the very beginning. Jesus has always existed, exists now, and will always exist.

The idea of the Word becoming flesh is one of the core beliefs of the Christian faith. The Nicene Creed says it this way:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human...¹

John’s gospel doesn’t tell us about the nativity scene in Bethlehem, but explores the bigger picture of the coming of Emmanuel. The Word, as the agent of creation, enters His creation, bringing light and life to a world shrouded in darkness. I love John’s gospel. If you read on, he talks a lot about the idea of light coming into the world. It’s to remind us of the truth and life that Jesus brings. “In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The Light

¹ The Nicene Creed, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 880.

shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it,” (verses 4 and 5), John writes. This is a metaphor for light, using it to get rid of ignorance, sin, and death – through the presence of Jesus Christ.

John portrays the Incarnation as the ultimate revelation – illuminating the pathway to reconciliation with God – which happens for us on Good Friday’s cross, but especially at Resurrection morning’s empty tomb! The belief in Christ’s bodily death and resurrection is the other Core belief of the Christian faith. Any person who tells you something counter to Jesus being fully God and fully human, living a sinless life, dying for us on Good Friday’s cross, and then physically rising again on Easter morning – they don’t know what they’re talking about!

The Word Became Flesh

“The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us,” (verse 14). In His unconditional love for us, God condescends Himself so much to put on human skin, steps into the human experience, and bridges the gap between Creator and His creation. What a tremendous length He is willing to go to, in order to redeem and reconcile His creation – and us – to Himself! How He loves us!

In these gospel readings we find threads of a story that goes far beyond our ability to understand or explain. The Incarnation – God-with-us – was not just an historical event, but it changed the entire order of the universe. God flipped the whole world upside down. In the birth at Bethlehem, God’s love, mercy, and grace intersected with human history, and brought hope, light, redemption, and reconciliation. His presence, through the Holy Spirit, continues to bring that to us moment by moment.

In knowing this great truth from Holy Scripture, may we, as His followers, be stirred by the deep mystery of His coming. Let us embrace the humility of the manger, and the significance of the Word made flesh. In doing so, we become participants in the eternal story of God’s relentless love unfolding in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Prayer: God of glory,

Your splendor shines from a manger in Bethlehem, where the Light of the world is humbly born into the darkness of human night. Open our eyes to Christ’s presence in the shadows of our world, so that we, like Him, may become beacons of Your justice, and defenders of all for whom there is no room. Amen.