



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25, 2018

ISAIAH 52:7-10; PSALM 98; HEBREWS 1:1-12; JOHN 1:1-14

LIGHT AND LIFE

John 1:1-14 *[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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.]

Today, the Word became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth. Amen.

Merry Christmas!

About thirty miles north of Dublin, Ireland, in a bend of the River Boyne, there is an ancient passage tomb, called

Newgrange. Imagine a large kidney-shaped burial mound, 93 yards in diameter -- almost the length of a football field -- and about 15 yards high. It was built over 5000 years ago by Stone Age

farmers -- three millennia before the birth of Christ.

The mound covers a rock passageway that leads to a central tomb that held the bones and ashes of the dead. It was long thought that Newgrange was just a Neolithic tomb, but forty years ago archeologists discovered something extraordinary. They unearthed a window, called a roof-box, directly over the entrance to the passageway. They realized that this roof-box is positioned in such a way that once a year at the Winter Solstice the rising sun shines directly through the window, along the long passage, and into the inner chamber. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens to illuminate the dark, central tomb.

It was a breathtaking discovery, to realize that in 3000 BCE, before Stonehenge or the great pyramids of Egypt were built, an ancient people designed and created such a sacred place dedicated to anticipating, focusing and celebrating the sun's rays on the shortest day of the year. Archeologists think it took generations of hard labor to drag the stones in place. It must have been important 5000 years ago to remember

that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

At our Christmas Eve services yesterday, our gospel reading was Luke's account of the birth of the baby Jesus. While Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem, she gives birth to her first-born son in a manger because there is no room at the inn. Angels appear to shepherds keeping watch over their flock, lighting up the night sky and singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven. This day your Messiah is born." The shepherds travel to share this amazing news with Jesus' parents and then return to the fields, praising God for all they have witnessed. It is a joyful, tender story.

On Christmas Day, we hear a much more mystical gospel -- John's cosmic account of the birth of Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." It reminds us of another archetypal story of creation, the very beginning of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth." So immediately we know that this story of human birth is inextricably connected to the story of the origin of all

things. It is the story of capital “L” Life, from before time began, through the Stone Age and the construction of the Newgrange tomb, through the birth, life, and death of Christ, spilling out in our present day, and sweeping into the future.

It is also the story of capital “L” Light. John says, “What has come into being was life; and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The light shines -- present tense -- and darkness does not overcome it. It is a primordial promise and the bedrock of our faith. In Christ, the One who was with God in the beginning and who lives among us still, we have all the light we need. There is no darkness -- in the world or in ourselves -- that can overpower the light of Christ. Joy to the world, indeed!

Many of us had an expected encounter with darkness last Thursday when the wind storm caused many power outages in Seattle. I didn’t realize our entire neighborhood had lost power until I got home. Even with the light of the moon, nothing looked familiar in the almost pitch-black house, and I had to stop and

think about where I was and where I could find candles and matches. Then I felt my way slowly and carefully. All it took was the light of one candle to get re-oriented to the whole house.

In the great cosmic story of God’s relationship with creation, the nativity of Jesus is that first candle. The one that orients us to the truth of God and of ourselves. Because Jesus was human *and* the “exact imprint of God’s very being,ⁱ we have seen and know that the material world is good and that our own incarnation is the “hiding place of the Spirit.”ⁱⁱ Because Jesus’ life of mercy and justice was offered freely and unsparingly, we have seen and know the immeasurable love of God. Because Jesus’ death became the birthplace of new life and the gift of the Holy Spirit to humanity, we have seen and know that the grave does not have the last word.

This is the Light of Christ that shines in the darkness, the light that cannot be overcome. It is the light that wakes us up to the needs of refugees fleeing violence and poverty. It is the light that makes clear the path for caring for our beautiful,

suffering planet. It is the light that warms fearful hearts, fuels generosity and heals divisions.

At Christmas, we rejoice over the dawning of this light. We join the choirs of angels in praising God for this gift of love and mercy. And as we realize again what it means to be human and holy, we rekindle our desire to go deeper in following Jesus. We claim our birthright as children of God and our responsibility to bear this Christ light in our own time and place.

What does it look like this Christmas for you to bear the light of Christ? Where are the places of fear, vulnerability, or need -- among your family and friends, your city,

the world? It only takes a little care, a little light to re-orient someone, to ground them in the knowledge and felt experience of love and hope, to help them remember that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

We are like the roof-box in the Newgrange burial mound -- even and especially on the darkest days, we can turn toward the light of Christ, allowing God's love to shine through us and illumine the shadowy passageways ahead. Then as we are filled with that light, even the darkest tomb will know warmth and new life.

Merry Christmas!

ⁱ Hebrews 1.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, "Cosmic Christ."



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