



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 29, 2019
ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 147:13-21; GALATIANS 3:23-25; 4:4-7; JOHN 1:1-18

DAZZLING DARKNESS

John 1:1-18 *[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. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.]

Merry Christmas! We just heard the first verses of John's gospel. Here's another translation:

"In the origin there was the Logos, and the Logos was [face to face] with God, and the Logos was God. In him was life, and this life was the light of all people. The light shines in

the darkness and the darkness did not conquer it."

The word "logos" comes from Greek, meaning the divine reason that infuses the universe, giving it form and meaning. This infinite creativity communes with God, is Godself, and then became flesh and lived among us. Or more literally, the Logos

“pitched a tent among us,” entering the web of humanity and changing it forever.

This is our cosmic narrative of the babe in the manger and our fundamental truth as Christians: *The Logos, the light of all people, shines in the darkness and is not overcome.* “Shines” – present tense.

I’ve been thinking a lot about darkness and light this week. In a conversation with a friend, she mentioned that she suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), and that the fall was difficult for her as dusk descended a few minutes earlier day after day. But then she added, “It’s better now. Knowing that the days are getting longer, even though I can’t see the difference yet, really helps.”

For almost all of human history, people’s lives were completely ordered by the natural rhythms of dawn and dusk, sun and moon, seasons of cold and dark followed by seasons of warmth and light. There was no moderating the darkness of night on a consistent or broad scale until just a few hundred years ago. So, our ancestors knew night and darkness in a way we can only imagine when we are in the wilderness or there’s a power outage.

In the dark of night, we are acutely aware of our lack of sight. We lose our bearings, stumble over familiar surroundings, and doubt our intuition. Darkness can seem

infinite, an abyss or endless sea. We are afraid – of surprise, lurking danger, or fantastical creatures. This time of year, when the nights are longest and the earth is cold and barren, time seems to slow down and almost get stuck.

Prior to 350 AD, Christians celebrated Jesus’ birth at different times of the year – including March, April, May and November. But then Pope Julius declared that the official date was December 25, integrating it with a Roman winter solstice festival. This Roman birthday of the sun became the Christian birthday of God’s Son.ⁱⁱ For people whose lives were governed by the rhythms of night and day, Jesus’ birth in the time of deepest darkness offered a tangible symbol of what John’s mystical gospel had pointed to for hundreds of years: “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

So, on this first Sunday of Christmas, we celebrate the inbreaking of the light of Christ that restores vision, warms hearts, illumines hidden places, and brings new life out of barrenness. We sing “Glory to God in the Highest” and “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice!” We relish that our time of waiting is over and the gifts of God, as known through Jesus, are our inheritance, too. The twelve days of Christmas are a time of profound and awe-struck joy.

The symbols of darkness and light are so ingrained in the meaning of Christmas, let's look at them a little more. The power of symbols is that they have many layers of meaning, sometimes unconscious. Like an iceberg, we may only pay attention to what we can see, but there is more underneath.

Our gospel today proclaims, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." A more literal translation reads, "the darkness did not conquer it." There is good news here, which is the steadfast conviction that nothing can separate us from the light, the love of God. That is unequivocally good news.

There is also a tension, though, a sense of struggle between darkness and light that can quickly give way to the dualism of "light is good" and "darkness is bad." And while that makes for great story-telling in Star Wars, it can be profoundly harmful. I want to name two ways that can be so.

The first is particular to our time, in this country that has so much work to do in acknowledging and dismantling racism and repairing the harm caused to people of color. When we allow the Christian story to be short-handed as victory of the "good" light over the "evil" darkness, we are only a step away from whiteness equaling holiness and blackness equaling sin and brokenness. It is

one-way white superiority can be communicated in our tradition, and it causes grave harm to our brothers and sisters of color.

So if we truly intend to respect the dignity of every human being, we need to grapple with our habits of speech and symbol and be willing to change. I'm not suggesting we eliminate imagery of light in darkness, but that we name context more fully. And that we flesh out other images, too, like: Hope Fulfilled and a God who offers Godself completely to the world, clothed in vulnerability.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second way our symbols of light and darkness can cause harm goes to the heart of what it means to be human. Physical and metaphorical darkness, times of not seeing or feeling lost, are unavoidable in life. We know that. We cannot be vulnerable, learn to love, and grow into our truest selves without experiencing grief, confusion, and emptiness.

When we try to excise these experiences, rush past them, force ourselves into seeing only light, we hurt ourselves and others. "Because what appears to be absence and obscurity may actually point to a luminosity, presence, and fullness of being particular to the domain of darkness."^{iv} Darkness is where transformation, growth and healing happen. It is where we dream, rest our bodies and

connect with each other. There are more babies conceived in December than any other time of year.

And darkness bookends our life: we enter life in darkness and let go into what is next by closing our eyes to the light of this existence. Darkness is of God and can never be “bad.” It is the seedbed of life.

In his poem “The Night,” Henry Vaughan writes, “There is in God, some say/ A deep

and dazzling darkness.” And today, we proclaim the good news:

The Logos, the light of all people, *shines* in this darkness. From the indwelling of light and darkness, the Word became flesh and lives among us, full of grace and truth.

Amen.

ⁱ David Bentley Hart, The New Testament: A Translation, 2017, with parenthetical from The New Interpreter’s Bible One-Volume Commentary, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The First Christmas, 2007, p. 171.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lenny Duncan, Dear Church, 2019, p. 67.

^{iv} The Book of Symbols, p. 102.



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