

“Christmas Light”
Christmas Day Sermon
Text(s): John 1:1-14
- Pastor Ken Nelson

Darkness has always been a potent metaphor for those things in life that either frighten or entice us. Spiritual or moral darkness describes anything that causes a person to recoil or shrink in fear on one hand, or dilutes Godly joy, confusing it with vain personal pleasures. We know darkness in our physical lives when illness stalks us or need overwhelms our resources. We know darkness in our emotional lives when we are depressed or guilt ridden or hopeless; when we live with violence or addiction or both. We know darkness in our social lives when important, even intimate relationships fail, when the blessing of solitude gives way to the burden of loneliness, when we cannot make or keep friendships. We know darkness in our civil and political lives when we cannot find unity on anything substantive or only at the expense of equitable policies for all; when we are governed by a divide and conquer, *“come out with the best talking point”* mentality. And we know darkness in our spiritual lives when prayer seems an empty exercise, time in God’s word a quant idea or faint memory, and worship a performance offered to an absent audience. Darkness symbolizes all this.

A couple of years ago, our family visited the Black Hills, and we toured an underground formation known as “Wind Cave.” It was discovered by some ranchers who heard a strange sound coming from a small hole in the South Dakota prairie. As you enter you are literally sucked in. You wind your way through narrow formations of minerals and down...constantly down for several hundred yards. Then the tour leader takes you to the lowest point in the cave, has you stand still, and he extinguishes the lights that illumined the path. You are enveloped by an utter and impenetrable blackness. It was the most profound darkness I have ever felt – yes you “feel” that kind of dark. It made no difference whatsoever whether your eyes were open or closed; it made no difference if it was midnight or high noon outside. And no amount of time would allow your eyes to adjust - there was nothing to adjust too.

Then the tour leader lit his headlamp and it was amazing how much that little light changed your perspective. Your eyes were drawn again to your surroundings, the texture of the walls and the narrowness of the passages. The tour leader had asked us how hard we thought it would be to find our way out of the cave without any light. We all said it would be impossible. He agreed, saying that any attempt would be not only futile but also dangerous since we could not see the hazards, the slippery places, or tell the difference between a five-foot and a fifty-foot drop. He said *“your best bet would be to wait for someone else to enter the cave and find you.”*

It takes no great imagination to make the connection between the darkness of that cave and the darkness we know in our lives; between the light from our leader's headlamp and the light of Christ, the Light of the world. *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them light has shined”* are the words the Prophet Isaiah used to describe his people and his world. What he foretold we repeat today...there is One who came for us, who enters our darkness, finds us and brings us out. A light the darkness is powerless to extinguish – Jesus Christ.

But let's not jump to conclusions either. What we celebrate today is only the first pin prick of light into the world, a veritable head lamp in a chasm of darkness. Think about it. The Christian story of salvation according to John begins by describing Jesus Christ as "*the Word*", yet we know that like us, at his birth Jesus couldn't utter a single intelligible sound. We sing of the power of God in our Christmas songs today, like the angels did, but must remember Jesus could not even lift his head feed himself or take hold of any of the gifts the magi presented him in homage. He was weak and vulnerable, fragile and open to attack. Those very angels knew what they would be asked to witness from heaven, a Christ on a cross, a man so worked over by temptation that some of them would be sent of God to minister to him in the wilderness.

Luke tells us of a Christ born to inhospitality even in his own Father's hometown and to Matthew tells us he just about lost his life when Herod sent soldiers to extinguish this "light" before it could show anybody the way to another King. Your salvation story, the one John tells, begins with a light that shines in the darkness. But it is not a blinding light – not yet anyway. It is a barely perceptible glow against the intimidating or enticing darkness of the real world. But open your eyes, dear Christmas worshipper, for this light is nonetheless a thing of grace and beauty. You are here today because you've seen it, want to see it more, want to follow it and see its intensity grow in you. It is the first light of the Christ Child, sent to find us who would otherwise not know which way to turn, what to duck our heads for, what to avoid lest we fall, when to retreat from a dead end and try another route.

Ancient tradition called Jesus the Dayspring, and is employed in the great Advent hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel". "*O come O Dayspring come and cheer, our spirits by your advent here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight*". Your salvation story begins small, there is no "shock and awe" in God's arsenal....he conquers gradually, by shining first this way, then that...then right at you! Christmas is the first glimpse, other lights will be lit before our rescue is complete: the candlelight of that last supper on Maundy Thursday; the soldiers' torchlight of Good Friday; the descent into the fires of death and hell of Holy Saturday; till the full and lasting brightness of the empty tomb on Easter morn shines for us.

Today, the light is illumined. Let that be enough. While we still know dark corners and fearsome shadows in our lives, we see something because of today...God is with us. Christ our rescuer has found us and will remain until our deliverance is complete. He dwells in the unapproachable light of heaven, but comes to us small and humble, till the eyes of our heart can adjust. Today we hear his word, like a tour leader telling us where he is. Today the light is lit, to you God has given a great light, and for you it will continue both day and night. That is enough to warrant our worship today. You have been found and you will be led to glorious, endless day. And the darkness can't do a thing about it. Merry Christmas. AMEN

