

Christmas time is here. And for us it is a season of light. I love that in our preparation for Christmas during Advent, on Wednesdays we prayed Evening Prayer. Each night—in the dark—we began with the Service of Light. We prayed, “Jesus Christ in the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome.” What a thing to confess. And this is what brings us here today. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

The title for my sermon today is *The darkness does not win*. I hope that this is a sentiment you share with me already. The language of light and darkness is loaded with meaning. It is also loaded with ambiguity these days. So, let me start with what I don’t mean.

We hear the language of *light* all over these days. There are calls to be the light—in the talk shows and on Twitter—and it is usually an attempt to embrace whatever seems positive in the eyes of the world at the moment. However, the nature of light is constantly changing. And this kind of light is often mistaken. Isaiah warns us against those “who put darkness for light and light for darkness.” And this is going on all around us.

When we think of darkness, it is often about the trouble in the world around us—the trouble that we find in our own lives. Natural disasters, wars and rumors of wars, depression, loss, disease, and pain. And these are real struggles. And this is close to what I mean. All of these things are related to the darkness. They express the brokenness of our world. But this is still not exactly what the language of light and darkness is getting at in Scripture.

Now, if I am going to say that *the darkness does not win*, I am naturally suggesting that the *light* does win. We get a little taste of this victory at the Nativity of our Lord. And as I said, we have been confessing this for weeks in Advent. And I think that this is a better place to start—with a right understanding of what the Gospel writers mean by *light*. And we need to understand what Jesus means as He talks about such things.

The Gospel reading for Christmas day might seem a little perplexing to us. Perhaps we were expecting last Sunday’s reading from Matthew 1, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”

Or maybe you were expecting last night’s reading, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered...And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

This is all wonderful stuff. And if you missed it, read it later today. But John—as he begins His account of the Gospel—goes back not just to the birth of Jesus, but to the creation of everything. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

You can hear that John invokes Genesis 1 as he begins his Gospel. He will do something similar with his first epistle as well. “That which was from the beginning, which

we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.”

Remember that all creation begins with God’s transcendent Word, “Let there be light.” And then Moses reports, “And there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.” The sun and the moon don’t come until the fourth day. But here is light at the very beginning of things—at the first day of creation. God gives light to the world. And this is just the beginning.

Christmas is all about the coming of the Light into the world. Deep inside we resonate with this idea. Look at the way we decorate. We hang lights. We light candles. We fire up the fireplace. We put stars on top of our trees. Even the liturgical color moves from pensive blue to radiant white.

The symbolism of *light* in John’s Gospel has many layers. *Light* can refer simply to Christ. In fact, in John 8, Jesus will use this language about Himself. He says, “I am the light of the world.” And John makes this bold claim about Him in our Gospel reading today, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Christ is to our souls what the sun is to creation. He is the center and source of all spiritual light, warmth, life, growth, and beauty.

And thus, light can also refer to the work of the Church making Christ known—especially now we herald the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth. At Bethlehem, as the heavens radiated with the glory of God, the light came down. And He cast the darkness away.

In our reading we hear of John the Baptist. And we hear that he was not the light—not exactly. He came to proclaim the light—to reflect the light—literally he came to be a witness—a martyr—for the light. Interesting language from one who will be executed for preaching the good news of Christ.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says of His disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

And this bridges nicely into understanding light as a life of faith lived in accord with His commands. Light can also mean something like obedience to the will of God. In John 3:20, Jesus says, “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.”

Light can refer to the life of Christ—the kind of life He gives by grace to His followers. And it can express eternal life and the abundant life that can be found only in Christ. This seems to be gist of verse four of our reading, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

Now it may seem that John is being ambiguous in verse five of our reading. Here he says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This term *overcome* can also be translated as *understand* or *comprehend*. The *New King James Version* reads, “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

Certainly, this suggests that those Christ claims as His own—those who receive His gifts through faith—will not be overcome by the darkness—either amid our lifetime struggle with sin—or in the life of the new creation to come—because we belong to the One who is the Light of the World.

All of this serves to help define darkness. It is something like turning away from the light—to ignore it—to relish a life without Christ. It is like worshipping the creature instead of the Creator—as we hear in Romans 1. Darkness is a hard heart to all that God would say and all that God would do in our world.

Darkness is John's way of talking about the fallen world of sin. This is living out our own misguided passions—giving into temptation—ignoring our responsibilities—maintaining our grudges—living for ourselves—ignoring eternity for the tyranny of the moment. Living as if God doesn't exist. Living as if we matter most. And this kind of darkness has the world trapped. It seems to have some success. But it will not prove victorious.

Light is just more powerful, even when darkness is most pervasive. We can think about this practically. Have your kids ever shone a flashlight in your face in the middle of the night? Have you ever been kept awake by an overly bright streetlight outside your house? Have you ever been drawn with curiosity to some grand sale in town because the establishment blasted a spotlight into the sky? No matter how much darkness, light pierces that darkness.

And the darker the night, the brighter the light shines. We know that the darkness will not be victorious over the world, because it was not victorious over the One through whom the world was made.

Yes, Christmas is about the Good News that the bad guys will not ultimately defeat the good guys. God cares for Mary and Joseph. Herod's plans will be thwarted. Christmas heralds the angelic message, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Christmas is about the hope of God's purposes to be established on earth and a better life after this life. Christmas is supposed to be merry and cheerful and inspiring. But if that's all we say, or all we believe, we haven't gotten the literal beating heart of the Christmas story.

We can be confident that in the end, darkness doesn't win. It's not because of grandma's cooking or a familiar Christmas movie. It's not because dreams come true when we believe, no matter what we actually believe.

Our confidence is rooted in history. Our faith is based on fact. What we celebrate in this season is not the triumph of the human spirit—or the importance of family—or the power of positive thinking. We worship the Christ Child—born in a manger in Bethlehem—come to save us from darkness.

And this is not some myth. That Baby was really born, to a real virgin, just as the Prophets foretold. Take the Christmas card out of your head. His presence in the world is more real than ours. He came as the perfect Man and eternal God. He lived. He died. He rose from the dead on the third day. He is coming again. We know that the darkness of the world will not be victorious, because it was not victorious in Bethlehem or Jerusalem. Christ achieved precisely what He intended.

If God can summon light into existence when there was only darkness, surely He can send His light into the world in the coming of Jesus Christ. And we can rest in the assurance of complete success, no matter how impossible the odds. This is the miracle and the wonder of Christmas. The Light of the world was born in the darkness of night, as the Word of God lay in the manger with a destiny to change everything.

And so we are left to recognize, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

And we are called to live in the light. And we confess this glorious light with the Angels, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Or as John says, “The True Light, which gives light to everyone, has come into the world.” And the darkness does not win. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*