

The Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2021

"NEED A LIGHT?"

Psalm 147:12-20 ~ Ephesians 1:3-14 ~ John 1:1-18

When I was eight years old, I was invited to spend the night with my friend, Ellen. When bedtime rolled around, her mom asked me if I would like a night light in the room to help me sleep. "Oh, no!" I told her, not a little insulted. I hadn't used a night light in years! "Thank you anyway," I said, "I won't need it." "I'll just leave it here on the desk in case you change your mind," she said. Ellen looked at me behind her back and rolled her eyes. Grownups! But later, when Ellen turned off the light and crawled into her twin bed, and I lay in mine ... in the dark ... in a different house with my family far away ... ok...they were across the street ... but the bathroom was way down the hall ... I felt alone and afraid and not nearly as brave as before. I lay there for what seemed like hours, every strange creak and groan making my heart beat faster. I was too proud to break down and tell Ellen that I needed that light. So, I waited until I was sure that she was asleep and crept over to the desk and plugged it in. I didn't want to need it. I didn't want her to know that I needed it, and I hoped to unplug it before she woke. If that failed maybe she would think her mom had turned it on while we were asleep. Let me tell you, it wasn't the last time I found myself in a dark and lonely place in life wishing somebody would turn on the light.

The gospel of John begins with the story of the light from beyond ... shining into our darkness. It is a salvation story. It is a creation story. Mark starts his gospel with the ministry of Jesus, commencing with his baptism by his cousin, John the Baptist. That makes sense, since baptism is the place of our own beginning ... the birth water for those who are born again into eternal life. That's a creation story, too. Luke and Matthew prefer to begin the story of Jesus with the Nativity ... to show how God was in Christ from the moment of his conception. But John goes back to square one ... when only God was ... to tell us that already ... everything that Jesus would be ... was in God. The God that Jesus brings to human flesh is none other than the eternal Designer ... the God of Adam and Eve ... of Abraham and Sarah ... of Israel and all nations. The God we see in Jesus is the Creator in Genesis ... the pillar of fire in the exodus ... the judgment-invoking, salvation-proclaiming Word of the prophets.

What's more, John is telling us that in Jesus it is Genesis One all over again ... "In the beginning..." You remember Genesis One, don't you? Everything is chaos. The darkness is a given. But God says, "Let there be light!" And by the word of God, light asserts itself against

darkness ... order against chaos ... the dry land against the deep. Everything is differentiated by God ... everything has a place and a purpose ... and the pinnacle of creation is humanity ... created male and female in God's own image. God looked over all of it and said, "That's good! Let's take the day off to celebrate!" That's Genesis One. It was the original New Year's Day. Nobody knew to be prejudiced about anything. There was no violence. There was no sorrow. They were still discovering the wonders of God's handiwork. They hadn't even named everything yet. They were all a little wet behind the ears with an original innocence that just didn't know any better than to trust each other and to rely fully upon God. But the story goes downhill soon after. God places the people in a garden and walks with them in the cool of the evening. They are not alone until they choose to be. But, of course ... they choose to be ... and by their choices the darkness and the chaos return ... and always threaten to undo what God once made to be good. This is our common story with God.

John doesn't really add much to Genesis, but he makes commentary on it in the light of new developments. Humankind has done its best to undo God's good creation. Everything is chaos. The darkness is a given. But God has said "Let there be light" *again* in Jesus, and this is the light that we need. John says, "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*" (John 1:9). He is not talking about physics, of course, but metaphysics. He is talking about the darkness of our existence. He is talking about poverty and violence and injustice and oppression and disease and death. He is talking about despair and brokenness and confusion and fear and pain and grief. The darkness of human existence is a given. But God says to our inner darkness, "Let there be light!" and this light is Jesus. John says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it*" (John 1:5). The light we need is not the sun and the moon and the stars of Genesis One. They are not enough to make a life, because life is more than just being here. John says, "*In him was life, and the life was the light of all people*" (John 1:4).

The prologue of John is one of the great metaphysical masterpieces of all time, if not the greatest. The language is simple, Greek 101. The words are simple antitheses ... light and darkness ... word and object ... law and grace ... life and death. But this simplicity disguises a complex tapestry of mystery and philosophy. John draws upon the theology of ancient Israel, the *logos* or "word" of God, which spoke all things into being ... which came to the prophets ... which will not return to God void ... but will accomplish the purpose for which it was spoken. John draws upon the philosophy of the Stoics who believed the divine *logos* or "reason" was the pervasive principle giving order to a constantly changing universe. He draws upon the universal image of light ... and there's not a religion in the world that doesn't light a candle against the darkness. He connects with the distant, eternal mystery of that which is beyond us ... which we cannot quite name but which we desperately need. And he brings all of these

together when he says: *"The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a parent's only child, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).

John begins his story of Jesus by telling us what it means, namely, that God has made all things new ... that the light from beyond still shines for us ... that life is still a gift of God from beyond. This life is in Christ ... this connection to the light is in Jesus ... and we are not alone in the dark. It's Genesis one all over again, and once again we have the choice to walk with God in the garden or foolishly go it alone. John says, *"To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God"* (John 1:12). In other words, John gives us in this majestic masterpiece what Paul puts into a few words in his second letter to the Corinthians:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:17-19).

I think it's easy for us to forget that sometimes. The world feels old and worn out. The chaos closes in. The darkness gets to us. We turn our backs on God ... sometimes willfully ... sometimes just not looking where we are going. Then we experience some event beyond the limits of our competency to handle ... we face disaster ... we stare death in the face ... and we are scared witless by the darkness. We feel so alone. But turn around. Don't you see? The light is still shining, and the darkness has not overcome it ... and God is still with us and nothing can separate us from the love of God. You can count on it!

Maxie Dunham tells the story of Lloyd C. Douglas, the author of *The Robe* and other novels, who lived in a boarding house when he was a student. A retired music teacher lived on the first floor. The music teacher was in poor health, unable to leave his apartment. They developed a friendship and a daily ritual. Each morning Douglas would come down the steps from his apartment ... open the music teacher's door and ask him, "What's the good news?" Each day the music teacher would pick up his tuning fork ... tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and say "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday ...; it will be middle C tomorrow ... it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat ... the piano across the hall is out of tune ... but my friend, that is middle C!"

As we move through life, we look for that place ... for those familiar bearings ... those unchanging certainties upon which we can rely ... which will always be there, no matter what. They are hard to find. Like driving at night in a fog we peer into the new year wondering what's ahead ... especially this year. We know that bad news will come and in some cases we

already know what it will probably be. But in all of the change and chaos around us ... and in the uncertainty of the future ... we can count on this one thing. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. God is still with us in Jesus Christ ... and nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. That is the good news. You can count on it. You can set your bearings by it. You can make a life with it. It's a night light for all of us who have the sense to be afraid of the dark. It's a beacon for all who are lost to find their way home.

John Claypool remembers a family who visited Carlsbad Caverns several years ago. When they reached that point in the tour when the guide extinguishes all the lights to give people the experience of total darkness, a little boy began to cry out in fear. But his older sister gave him comfort. "Don't worry, little brother!" she said. "Don't worry! There's somebody here who knows how to turn on the lights!"

That's what the gospel of John is telling us today, my brothers and sisters: "Don't worry! Don't worry! There's somebody here who knows how to turn on the lights."

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 all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.

This is the good news of Jesus, the Christ. This is the word of God for the people of God! Thanks be to God! May we pray?

God of light and life, thank you for a new day in a new year in a new creation. As we face the year ahead we are filled with hope, not based on any confidence in ourselves but in remembering that you are indeed, you are still God with us. Fill us with resolve each new day to fix our hearts on the light of your grace and glory among us so that we might enter the beginning of 2021 rejoicing in all you have done in our midst and reveling in how you have loved the world through us and renewed by the life you have poured into this place. Majestic Mystery, gracious Savior, creating and recreating God, let the light of Christ shine more clearly through us in all we say and do for Jesus' sake. Amen.