

In the Darkness

4th Sunday in Advent – December 17/18, 2005

Sermon Background Study

John 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And 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.

In so many ways, our world seems to prefer the darkness to the light. Out of immeasurable love, Jesus meets us in the darkness, bringing the light to our lives. This is the true Christmas miracle.

Like some people, I was afraid of the dark when I was a child. I can remember insisting upon some sort of night light in my bedroom. I knew that only bad things could happen in the dark. Given the biblical perspective on the darkness (see the text box), perhaps I was right. The Bible has nothing good to say about the darkness and neither did I.

As I grew older, I outgrew my fear of the dark. To my astonishment, I came to enjoy a darkened house. It is quiet and peaceful. No demands are made of me. At times, I guess I prefer the darkness to the light.

Our world is like that. The world prefers the darkness, or at least pretends to. In the beginning to his Gospel, John lays out an immense theology of light, the “true light, which enlightens everyone.” We might prefer the darkness, but Jesus has turned on the lights that can never be turned off.

A different beginning – a different Gospel

Every Bible reader knows that John's Gospel is quite different from the other three.¹ John tells the story uniquely. He begins with a majestic piece of theology in verses 1-18. His prologue is poetic and unlike anything found in the synoptic Gospels. Much of John's Gospel takes place in Jerusalem during Jewish

Light and Darkness

Darkness, the absence of light, is a physical and spiritual reality in the Bible. Darkness is also an apt symbol of some of the most profound human experiences. “With approximately two hundred references, darkness is a major actor in the biblical drama.”¹ Perhaps most intriguing is this. Unlike virtually all other biblical images, darkness is unambiguously negative. There are no good aspects or manifestations of darkness in the Bible. Perhaps it is reasonable to be afraid of the dark!

From its literal beginning, the Bible depicts the on-going struggle of the light to overcome the darkness. “Let there be light!” is God's first act of creation. And the conquering of the darkness begins. If darkness is ignorance, then the light is understanding (Psalm 82:5). If the light is goodness, darkness is the evil acts of those who oppose God (Proverbs 2:13). If light enables us to see who God is, then the darkness makes us blind (Matthew 6:22-23).

In the New Testament, darkness is very much a spiritual reality. Jesus speaks of the “power of darkness” (Luke 22:53). For Paul, the world is divided into the “children of light” and the “children of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:5).

In contrast, the light is both life-giving and protective. It represents goodness and blessing. Light is the symbol of truth. God himself is light. The church is a community of light, made up of disciples who are to be the light to the world.

It isn't hard to see how the light becomes a symbol of salvation. Redemption consists of emerging from the darkness into the light. Further, the struggle between light and darkness is never a battle of equals. If, as John says, Jesus is the “true light, which enlightens the world,” then the only question is when the darkness will fully and finally be overcome, and that will be with Christ's second coming.

1. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* entry on “darkness.”

¹Matthew, Mark, and Luke are sometimes referred to as the synoptic Gospels, in that they are similar enough in their structure that we can read them side-by-side (“syn-optic”). They also share some passages word-for-word. Most scholars believe that both Matthew and Mark had access to Mark's Gospel, it having been the first written. This would explain the similarities. Nonetheless, each of the synoptic Gospels paints a very distinctive portrait of Jesus.

festivals. The synoptics are set almost entirely in Galilee and record only a single visit to Jerusalem. Though Matthew has five blocks of Jesus' teaching, none of the synoptics have anything like the lengthy discourses by Jesus that we find in John. In the synoptics, Jesus' miracles are the enactment of God's kingdom. In John, Jesus' miracles are signs to his identity. In the synoptics, Jesus' true identity is something to be guarded and hidden from the masses. He claims nothing about himself. But in John, Jesus makes the most stupendous claims himself. Jesus openly declares himself to be the "son of God." Seven times he begins with the words "I am," which is the name of God, as he takes one Old Testament image after another upon himself: "I am the bread of life," "I am the living water," "I am the light of the world," "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and so on. Most remarkable, on one occasion Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Frankly, without John's introduction, we'd probably be like many of Jesus' contemporaries, saying, "Who does he think he is!"

But we have John's beginning, his prologue, and it is every bit as important to unlocking his Gospel as were the beginnings to the synoptic Gospels.² In eighteen verses, John prepares us for everything that comes after. Getting from "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word as God" to "Before Abraham was, I am" is not a very large leap.

The Word? In the Old Testament, God often acts by means of his "word." For example, in Genesis, God speaks his creation into existence. God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. Our own words can be a little like that. When we say, "I promise," we create a promise. Using "the Word" to refer to Jesus is a way for John to tell us that Jesus creates. God had brought light into the darkness at the beginning and now, in and through Jesus, God is doing it again. John's "in the beginning" evokes the opening words of Genesis and prepares us for the recurring New Testament theme of new creation.

The Incarnation

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

This may be the single-most profound and shocking sentence in the entire Bible. John's meaning is clear.

Our word "incarnate" comes from a Latin word meaning "be made flesh." ("Carnivorous" is based on the same Latin root.) Thus, when we refer to the incarnation or to "God incarnate," we are referring to "God made flesh" . . . God becoming human.

The early church had a word they used to describe Mary that is helpful here: *theotokos*, "God-bearer." We sometimes think that the point of the Virgin Birth is to emphasize Jesus' divinity. It is not. The early church embraced the teachings about the Virgin Birth because it emphasized Jesus' humanity! It is one thing to imagine that God might visit the earth. It is nearly incredible to claim that God would come to earth in the womb of this Jewish girl to be born into a humble life in the hills of Galilee.

An early Christian heretic named Marcion very much believed that Jesus was God. But he couldn't bring himself to see Jesus as truly human, saying, "Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes."¹ All the messiness of childbirth was too much for Marcion! But that very messiness drives home our proclamation that God has experienced life as we experience it. He has celebrated as we celebrate and suffered as we suffer.

1. from an excellent article on Mary by Timothy George in *Christianity Today*.

The Light and the Glory

We probably have a pretty good idea what John means when he describes Jesus as the true light that overcomes the darkness. But we may not be so clear what John means when he writes that "we have seen his glory" (verse 14). A person's "glory" is their true and essential character revealed for everyone to see. To glorify Jesus is to lift him up so that everyone can see his essential goodness, love, and righteousness.

When Moses was with God on Mt. Sinai, Moses asked to see God's glory. But Moses had to hide when God's glory passed by. He could not see God's face and live. But, John writes, in Jesus we see "the glory of the father's only son." Jesus is God made flesh. John says, if you want to know what God is like, take a long look at Jesus. Look at him, see God.³

As we approach Christmas, it is good for us to remember that Jesus glorified God, that is to say, Jesus revealed to us God's true character. How? In his death on the cross. Speaking of the "glory of the cross" seems odd given the humiliating and terrifying nature of crucifixion. Yet, the cross is the concrete expression of God's love. Later in John's beginning, John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus exclaims, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). This is a Christmas love I can scarcely comprehend. It is a light that overcomes the darkness in our lives.

²This series is in part based on Morna Hooker's, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*.

³In verse 17, John writes, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth through Jesus Christ." Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. He is the true revelation of God, full and complete, not a copy given indirectly through Moses. In this sense, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, for he is true embodiment of the Law.

Daily Bible Readings

(some of Jesus' remarkable claims about himself in John's Gospel)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 John 6:25-59 "I am the bread of life"	Day 2 John 8:12-20 "I am the light of the world"
Day 3 John 8:48-59 "Before Abraham was born, I am!"	Day 4 John 10:1-21 "I am the good shepherd"
Day 5 John 15:1-17 "I am the true vine"	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

December Book Recommendation

Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)

St. Andrew will be reading and preaching *Thru the Bible* next year. Many of us will be using the new *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and others. The Renovaré team has tried to combine the best of a study Bible and a devotional Bible in a single volume. The introductory materials and the book introductions are particularly helpful.

We have gotten copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. What a gift idea for Christmas!

Copies are available for \$25 outside the bookstore today.

Thru the Bible Reading Plan and Tips

God's Spirit uses our reading of Scripture to reshape our hearts and minds so that we become evermore Christlike. It is this reshaping, this renewing of ourselves, that has brought many of us to this one-year Bible reading journey. The book-at-a-time reading plan we'll be using is available now on-line at www.standrewccl.org, as are some tips for reading through the Bible.

Copies of the reading plan and tips are in today's worship bulletin.

We hope you'll consider joining us on this Bible journey.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John's prologue is eighteen verses long, yet John does not explicitly name Jesus until verse 17. He includes no stories of Jesus' birth or childhood as his Gospel moves forward. Re-read the first five verses of the prologue and then consider this question: What does it really mean to yourself and to your family that the Word was born to a young woman in an animal stable in a small town in a remote province of the Roman Empire? To put it another way, try to pull together John's prologue and the Christmas story about angels and shepherds. In light of John's prologue, what is a suitable theology of the manger?
2. The biblical use of light and darkness works on many levels. The study emphasizes some of the more theological aspects. But there is a very practical aspect as well. What is the darkness in your own life? Perhaps it is a health problem of a loved one or even yourself. Perhaps it is an addiction that threatens your life and your loved ones. Perhaps your darkness is a growing sense that the priorities in your life are messed up. Perhaps you are coming to realize that you go days without ever even thinking of God. How does Jesus and the Good News about Jesus bring light to this darkness? If Jesus comes into your darkness, where does he begin with your own new birth, your own re-creation?