

December 25, 2023 (Christmas Day) – John 1:1-18

“Highest, most holy, Light of Light eternal / Born of a virgin, a mortal He comes.” “Light and life to all he brings / Ris’n with healing in His wings.” “He came to us as light and life / And our redemption won.” These were all lines from hymns we’ve already sung this morning. Three Christmas carols, three references to Jesus being our light.

If you were here last night, you heard even more. “God with us is now residing / Yonder shines the infant light.” “Yet in thy dark streets shineth / the everlasting light.” “Silent night, holy night / Son of God, love’s pure light.” You just about can’t sing a Christmas carol without singing about the light of Jesus.

Which makes sense, of course. Jesus calls himself the light of the world, after all. It is perfectly appropriate to call Jesus our light at any time of the year. But it’s especially appropriate at Christmastime. It’s especially appropriate today. Right now. For we just read in our Gospel lesson the reason why Jesus calls himself the light of the world. And it begins right here in John chapter 1.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* These opening words of John’s gospel should remind you of the opening words of another book: the book of Genesis. *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.”*

In the beginning it was dark. It was formless. It was void. Void of substance. Void of creation. Most of all, void of life. And it would have continued to be dark and formless and void of life if God hadn’t then said, *“Let there be light.”*

There is no life without light. From a physics standpoint, light is energy. A world without light is a world that can’t have anything. No atoms. No molecules. No water or air. No plants or animals. Nothing. It all needs energy. It all needs light. No light, no life.

That’s how it works in our physical creation. That’s also how it works in our spiritual creation. No light, no life. Just as in the beginning the world was in darkness, so also we are born in darkness.

We are born in spiritual darkness. We are born without the knowledge of God. Without the ability to love him. Without the ability to obey him or serve him or even properly to search for him. We have no spiritual energy. We are dead in our sins. We are born in darkness. No light, no life.

The Book of Isaiah rather vividly describes this darkness in chapter 59: *“We hope for light and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight; among those in full vigor we are like dead men... We hope for... salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities.”*

Isaiah was talking about the people of his own day. Israelites who had gotten sucked into idolatry and corruption. Who didn’t turn to the Lord or listen to his Word. But we’re not that much different from them.

We’re born just as alienated from God, unable to please him, separated from him by our sins, groping our way through life without direction and without hope. It’s as if we have no eyes at all. It’s not just that it’s difficult to make our way to God and gain his favor. It’s completely impossible – unless the light shines on us.

Isaiah prophesied about the very light that we need. We heard from him last night, *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”*

And so, in our Gospel text for this Christmas Day, we don’t just hear John’s version of the creation story. We hear John’s version of our recreation story. *“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.”*

Some 2,700 years ago, Isaiah predicted it. 2,000 years ago, John described it. Today we celebrate it. The light of the world has come, and he has come to us. The Son of God became one of us, born of the Virgin Mary. And this little baby Jesus born on Christmas Day is the light of the world. Whoever follows him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

But what does that mean exactly? How does the light shine on us? What happens when this light shines? Well, John continues with that explanation in our reading. He writes, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

Yes, the light came when the eternal Son of God became flesh. The baby in Mary's arms is God. God the Son. God of God and Light of light, the Nicene Creed confesses. But He didn't come just to be born, John says. He came to live among us, as one of us. He came to tabernacle among us, as the Greek puts it. To dwell with his people like he did in the days of the Exodus. And he did this for thirty-three years.

And during this time, tabernacling with his people, we saw his glory. When the Israelites saw God's glory in the wilderness, what did they see? Well, they saw God's miraculous provision. The Red Sea parted. Water flowed from a rock. Manna from heaven appeared. The enemies of God's people were defeated.

In this time when Jesus tabernacles with his people, what did we see? The same thing. God's miraculous provision. Water turned to wine. The sick became well. Thousands were fed. Demons were driven out. Death was defeated. In the Exodus we saw God's glory in his love for his people. In Jesus, we see God's glory in his love for his people.

A love that is full of grace and truth. A love that forgives sins. A love that keeps no record of wrongs. A love that casts our iniquities as far as the east is from the west. A love that dies so that we may live. A love that is full of grace.

And a love that is full of truth. Last night, I talked about the lie that the serpent told. In Christ, we have the opposite. We have the truth of God. Truth that is sometimes hard to hear. The Law is God's truth, after all. And Christ speaks the Law. He tells us in no uncertain terms: you have sinned. You live in darkness. You are separated from my Father. The wages of your sin are death and hell.

But he also speaks the truth of God's love. The truth of why he was born. The truth that was proclaimed to Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph. The truth that was proclaimed to shepherds and wise men, Simeon and Anna. The truth that is still proclaimed to us through prophets and apostles.

Jesus is the light. Jesus is the truth. When the light of the world comes, everything is revealed for what it truly is. Wickedness and sin are laid bare. Nothing is hidden from him. False teaching and false prophets are exposed. False religions are seen for what they are.

And the truth is revealed. The truth that saves. This baby whose birth we celebrate today was born to save. To bring forgiveness for all sins. To wash away guilt. And to give us rebirth. Rebirth as children of God. Born not because any person willed it, but because God willed it.

He shined the light of Christ into our darkness. And from his fullness, we have received grace upon grace. The grace to know him and receive him and believe in his name, when so much of the world does not. And the grace of his forgiveness. Forgiveness that takes away the power of the Law. Grace that brings us in to the Promised Land of eternal life.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world. And we sing this day the glory of God's light, shined upon us. Light that brings life and hope to a dead, hopeless world. Light that shines through us, like a lamp you can't put out. Like a city on a hill that can't be hidden. Christ is the light of the world and he has made you to be children of the light. That you may reveal all that he has done. Amen.