



LESSONS

ISAIAH 52:7-10

PSALM 98

HEBREWS 1:1-4 [5-12]

ST. JOHN 1:1-14

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, you wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of Jesus Christ who came to share our humanity, and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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Liturgical Day: The Nativity of Our Lord; Christmas Day

Date: December 25, 2009

Sermon Title: Jesus Christ is the Light of the World

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a beautiful morning. These past couple of days, with the snow dusting everything from mountains to treetops to shrubs and hedges, I've felt like I've been driving around in a snow globe. There isn't much that is more beautiful than a fresh snowfall in the Rocky Mountains, and for someone who grew up in the Midwest, a white Christmas really tugs at the heartstrings. Everything is so white – so bright – that I can't help but keep thinking of the image of light that we find in this morning's Gospel lesson. In describing Jesus, whom John understands as the Word of God, dwelling in the flesh, he writes these verses:

*What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.*
[St. John 1:3b-5]

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Light has long been a symbol used by the faithful to refer to the presence of Christ in the world. For centuries, the church has chanted: *Jesus Christ is the light of the world; the light no darkness can overcome.* With candles and torches, in otherwise dark cathedrals, the early church imagined the light and life of Jesus beaming out into the world, illuminating all that surrounded it, and transforming everything that had previously been touched by darkness. These days, the power of light largely escapes us. We have lights everywhere:

1. Night Lights
2. Headlights
3. Spot lights
4. Flashlights
5. Street Lights
6. Emergency Lights

There is hardly a moment in our day when it is completely dark. Even on a moonless night, the bedrooms in our homes are lit by the illuminated numbers on alarm clocks, LEDs on the televisions, and the time stamp of our VCRs. Even here in our worship center, on a Sunday morning (or a Christmas morning), it is so bright, that we can sometimes barely see whether or not the candles are burning. And so it has become hard to imagine a place without light.

But that's not the case everywhere. A pastor I know tells of a trip he and his wife made to Sweden some years ago, about this time of year. They noticed that in many of the Swedish churches, it had become popular to have an area, often a large box filled with sand, in which dozens of candles were placed. People, upon entering the church, would light one of those candles. Sometimes they would come in the middle of the week, light a candle, stand by it quietly for a time, and then leave.

This pastor asked his host about these candles. What do they mean?

Why has this become important to them?

The host actually had no idea why this had become such a popular act. He thought it



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God's work. Our hands.

might have something to do with the fact that it is so dark in Sweden this time of year. When it is that dark, light takes on a new meaning. But he didn't think that the meaning was specifically Christian in nature. Many of these mid-week visitors aren't well versed in the Bible. They don't worship regularly on Sundays. Many of them know next to nothing about the Christian faith. Yet here they come, to light a candle and have a moment of silence by themselves. ⁱ

It's not just in Sweden, of course. Throughout the world, there has been a yearning for light beyond our present darkness – a yearning for something that many vaguely call "spiritual." It is a searching for meaning beyond ourselves. A searching for something to ground us in life. A searching for something that will illumine our path through life. A searching that hints at the darkness that is so pervasive – the darkness that so many want to escape.

I can't help but think that's what St. John had in mind when he wrote this beautiful poem about Christ. St. John no doubt knew darkness. He lived in the days before electric lights that pushed back the night. He knew what it was like to walk along dimly lit streets — wondering what lay just beyond the next shadow. St. John's world seemed a very dark place. It was not only an unlit place — but a place where the forces of darkness were powerfully evident. Illness, brokenness, pain, and sorrow were plenty in St. John's day... even persecution of the church by the political powers of the day. For some people, it must have seemed as though the darkness would consume them. It was into the darkness of that world that Jesus was born, and he brought with him a light that lit up the whole world.

I regularly listen to a podcast by theologian and professor Len Sweet. I'd comment it to you: he calls it [Napkin Scribbles](#) – and describes it as "thoughtful sketches of God and life from thinker and author, Leonard Sweet." Back in September, he was lamenting the early onslaught of Christmas decorations. And he recalled a story he heard at church camp when he was a child. Let me quote a portion of his presentation:

Some preacher was talking about a couple who were touring a cave with their son (11 years old) and their daughter (7 years old). The guide suddenly turned off all the lights to dramatize how completely dark and silent it is so far below the surface of the earth. When the guide did that, immediately there were two sounds. One was the little girl. As she was completely engulfed in this total darkness, she let out a whoop. And the other was her older brother, who said, "Don't cry. There is someone who knows how to turn on the lights."

I remember that because, what a great prelude to Christmas. Isn't that the message of Christmas? That no matter how depressed and how gloomy and how much of a struggle it seems, that in the midst of our darkness, in the worst of times, God does the best of things? In the midst of our darkness and fears, there is this word. Somebody is coming who can turn on the lights. And that one is Jesus, the Christ, the light of the world. ⁱⁱ

We gather here this morning to proclaim our belief that Jesus is this one who knows how to turn on the lights. The light that Jesus brought to the world is able to illuminate all that we know — literally shedding it in a different light, giving us an entirely new perspective on our world.

We gather here this morning, aware that there is darkness in each of our lives. I don't know what particular darkness each of you confronts this morning. It may be the darkness of a broken relationship. It may be the darkness of failing health. It may be the darkness of uncertain employment. It may be the darkness that accompanies a crisis in faith. I don't know what particular darkness each of you confronts this morning. But I do know this: our God is one who knows darkness. Our God knows pain, and disappointment, and abandonment, and failure. And it is that God, intimately knowing the darkness that creeps into our lives, who comes in the form of Jesus with the power of light. A light that

ⁱ William H. Willimon, writing in "On Our Minds" (Logos Productions, Inc. September 2003; Volume 9, Number 4).

ⁱⁱ Len Sweet, [Napkin Scribbles](#), "Happy Holy Daze; Let's All Go Shopping Early This Year!" September 27, 2009 (partial transcript).

can shine in our lives, bringing relief to even the darkest moments we can possibly imagine. And the wonderful truth about Christ's light is this: the darker the darkness, the brighter his light shines.

Some of you know that one of my favorite moments of the whole year took place last night. It happened at the conclusion of our Candlelight services. This Worship Area was completely engulfed in darkness, except for the processional candles at the altar and the Advent Wreath. The torches carried light back to the worshippers, each of whom had a small taper of their own. And as we sang *Silent Night*, the light was passed down each row, until everyone was standing with a lit candle in front of them. It is a moving sight, but most powerfully so from behind the altar. Because most people held their candles at chest height, I couldn't see more than a couple of the candles that front row people were holding. The light I saw — a light that eventually seemed to entirely fill the room — was reflected off of the faces of those who were at worship.

That seems to me an apt image of what this light of Christ is all about. The light that radiated here last night wasn't a light that came from within, as if we have the power and ability to make the world a perfect place. But instead, the light I saw was a light that came from somewhere else — to be exact: a light that came from the Advent Wreath which has served to announce the arrival of the Christ to us this past month. A light that came from the Christmas tree that celebrates our Lord's birth among us. A light that was reflected off the faces of those who had gathered here — faces that held the pains and sorrows, the joys and delights, that they had come in hopes of entrusting them to God. The light of Christ moved through us, and was reflected in the faces of those who were gathered here.

That is what St. John helps us to see this morning. That no matter how dark our world might become, there is a source of light available to us that the darkness can never overcome. That light is the presence of Christ, which comes from God, and dwells in our midst, and is ready to forgive us, renew us, and strengthen us for life's journey.

May this Christmas be a time when you truly sense that light of Christ in your life. And may God bless you with the peace and hope and joy that only comes from a life that is lived in the rays of this light.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 25, 2009)

English Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And 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. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/worship/church_year.

^{iv} St. John 1:1-14, *New Revised Version Bible* (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

Greek Text:

¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. ⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. ⁹ Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. ¹⁰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. ¹¹ εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. ¹² ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ¹³ οἱ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. ¹⁴ Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ^v

^v St. John 1:1-14, *The Greek New Testament*, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).