

John 1:1 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.

John 1:6 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.

John 1:10 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.

John 1:14 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. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

THE PINK TREE

A pastor told of making his way through the streets of inner city Los Angeles to do a Christmas Day service. He said that after the rush of Christmas Eve he was tired to the bone and was looking forward to the more relaxed morning service with its smaller crowd.

The streets on Christmas morn were deserted. Most families were at home enjoying the celebration of Christmas together.

His drive took him under a freeway overpass. And as he approached the freeway an odd sight caught his attention. It was a pink aluminum Christmas tree about three feet high set up on a small patch of grass between the bridge and the onramp to the freeway.

The pastor wrote, "There amid the blown trash and dirt and grime of the inner city overpass was this strange, glittering piece of joy."

It made him smile but it also made him feel sad. He knew who put up that tree.

That bridge was a makeshift home for the homeless. The church he served was two blocks away and often many of them would make their way to church for a bagged lunch and he had gotten to know some of them personally.

When he saw that little tree he thought of the people who had put it up. They had rescued that pink aluminum tree from the side of the road somewhere and placed it there as their own. It was their way of trying to have just a little bit of Christmas joy in a very joyless situation.

The pastor said that the little tree reminded him of our passage for today from John's gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

It's very easy to romanticize the message of Christmas. We revel in our warm feelings about family, and memories of celebrations from the past. Then we mix in the Christmas music and stories about the birth of Jesus.

I must admit that I love it. I look forward to it every year.

But, in some ways our celebration of Christmas leads us away from the true meaning of the incarnation. I think that's why our celebration of Christmas should be more than just one or two days. The liturgical tradition of celebrating the twelve days of Christmas gives us an opportunity to think more carefully about the season.

The gifts are all open. The Christmas tree has gone back into the attic. And now in a less emotionally charged atmosphere on these Sundays after Christmas we can ask ourselves,

"What did it all mean? Does anything lasting come out of Christmas?"

If we want to reflect more deeply on the meaning of the incarnation I think it is helpful to turn from the familiar gospel stories and listen to the message from a different perspective, the perspective of the theologian instead of the story teller.

For example, the Apostle Paul gave a very brief version of the Christmas message in his letter to the Philippians. Paul said that when Christ was born he humbled himself. He emptied himself of divine power and became like a slave. (Philippians 2:6-7)

John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that light shone into our darkness. But, the world did not know or accept Jesus even though the world came into being through him.

The theologians of the Bible make one thing crystal clear. The incarnation was not an easy journey. When Christ was born it was a difficult and costly experience. Those that prefer the darkness do not want the light. It illuminates things that they would rather not see.

SANITIZED THE STABLE

Over the years we have sanitized the stable and turned the manger into a place of sentimental glory. But, I wonder if we make the birth of the Savior too divine and not human enough. I wonder if we forget that the world into which Jesus was born was the same dangerous and difficult world in which we live today.

In fact, since our Savior was born in a stable I wonder if that pink Christmas tree near an overpass represents the meaning of Christmas better than the many brilliantly colored trees that fill most neighborhoods.

The incarnation was one small light shining in the darkness. And that darkness was real, just as the darkness in our own lives is real.

No one thought to look for a Savior in a manger. And no one would think to look for the meaning of Christmas under a makeshift home for the homeless. But, maybe that is where the light still shines. Maybe this is where the story still begins.

THE LIGHT OF RECREATION

You may have noticed that John's Christmas story takes us back to the beginning, the very beginning. When John talks about light shining in the darkness he is referring first of all to the light of creation. He is talking about that time when everything was dark and God said, "Let there be light."

And John tells us that this same light of creation shone in the life of the man named Jesus. Through his human life the world was recreated. Through Jesus we get a flesh and blood picture of God's love, a love that cannot be overcome even by the greatest darkness.

Henri Nouwen described the Nativity set under the altar in the Genesee Abbey. There were three small, featureless wooden figures representing the holy family. And though they were smaller than a human hand, there was a bright light shining upon them that projected their large shadows upon the wall of the sanctuary.

Nouwen wrote, "Without the radiant beam of light shining into the darkness there is little to be seen. I just might walk by these simple people and continue to walk in darkness. But, everything changes with the light."

I think that's a good image to describe our passage for today. John is saying that the birth of Christ casts a large shadow upon the earth. What seemed like an insignificant event at the time was indeed the turning point of all history. The Christmas carol puts it well; "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

And this is the important point. The incarnation is not just about light shining in the darkness way back when. The incarnation is also about light shining in the darkness here and now.

THE DARKNESS TODAY

I don't have to spend much time talking about the darkness. Most of us here today are well acquainted with the darkness.

But, can we see the light shining in our darkness? Do we have hope? Or are our lives overcome by discouragement and despair? Do we give in to our fears?

The political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes once wrote, "Life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Woody Allen, the Thomas Hobbes comedic successor puts it this way, "Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering--and its all over much too soon."

He also wrote, "More than any time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

Woody isn't kidding. This is the philosophy that he lives by. Unfortunately, as he has proved again and again in his personal life, this philosophy doesn't offer much hope. In an interview on public radio Woody said that the only reason he produces movies is to distract himself from thinking about the brevity of life.

Woody and Thomas do have a point. The natural world does seem bent on destruction. There are many reasons to lose hope.

And all too often we who call ourselves Christian are part of the problem. Though we talk a lot about God and Jesus, many of us live our lives in a state of constant despair. We resolutely reject the light and prefer the darkness. Instead of viewing the world as the wondrous creation of God we view it as a place of terror and uncertainty.

BRINGING LIGHT INTO OUR DARKNESS

This problem is reinforced by the media. The TV is filled with stories about killings, acts of terror, and scandal.

And many of us watch this stuff "religiously"!

If you want to feel bad about life, keep the cable news channel on at all times! You will become a member of the Thomas Hobbes, Woody Allen fan club. You will come to believe that the world is indeed all darkness.

Let me give you a challenge for the new year. Watch no more than thirty minutes of news a day, and spend at least thirty minutes on Bible study each day. I'm just saying that we who claim to be children of the light should give the light of life equal time.

In fact I think it might be a good idea to do your devotionals right after watching the evening news.

What does God say to a world that is nasty and brutish? How does light shine in our darkness? What good news are we called to preach to our world today?

A famous preacher before the advent of TV said that he prepared his sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand.

In other words the Word of God was designed to be used as a source of hope in a world of darkness and despair.

We are called to sing "This is My Father's World" to a people who have forgotten how to sing.

The Word of God is a light shining in the darkness, our particular darkness. And though many reject its message, we have been charged to carry the light to the world.

We have been charged to tell his message. We have been charged to reflect his glory.

The Word of God is still being "fleshed out" in the lives of God's people. The story that began with the birth of one special child long ago is still being reflected large on the wall of history.

And this story of incarnation is also reflected in our little lives as well. Don't think that what you do is too small to matter.

When the light of God's salvation shines on a person, they are reborn. The Scripture tells us that they become children of God. And that amplifies the importance of our actions.

GOD WAS IN CHRIST

In his Daily Study Bible series, William Barclay told of a little girl who when she was confronted with one of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament felt compelled to offer some explanation in defense of God. She said, "That happened before God became a Christian."

Actually, I would say that some passages of Scripture demonstrate how people misunderstand the will of God and in the name of religion do terrible things. We have daily examples of this each day.

But, in John's portrayal of the birth of Jesus we learn that God was always like Jesus. We just didn't realize that until Jesus came.

And if we believe that, then the message of the Christmas angels is a message that we can proclaim as well.

“Don’t be afraid.” There is no reason to fear the darkness of the present age or the darkness in our own heart. A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

FLESHING OUT THE MESSAGE

One commentator wrote that the “real struggle of Christmas is not if there will be any Christmas trees in airports or nativity scenes in front of City Hall or if we spent more than we should have.

The real struggle for the soul of Christmas is allowing Jesus, the ‘Word made flesh’ ... to be genuinely enfleshed in us, enfleshed in our hearts and minds, enfleshed in our relationships and in our care for the stranger, for the jobless, for the homeless, for those in any need or trouble, enfleshed in our struggle for justice and peace among all people.”

To put it another way, the best way to celebrate the incarnation, our belief that God is with us is to be with others in their time of need. Like John the Baptist we are not the light, but we do testify to the light.

William Willimon told of a mission trip to Haiti. The members of his group brought things that the missionaries needed: eyeglasses, medicine and food.

They loaded all the supplies into suitcases and delivered them in person. Then they spent a week working in the center for poor children.

Willimon said that on the night before they were to go home the missionaries said,

“We are so grateful, and the people are so grateful for all the gifts you have brought to us. We will put them to good use, as you have seen.

But, we are even more grateful that you came to be here with us. It can get lonely here.

Sometimes we wonder if anyone cares about our work. Visitors are rare. And the people say when you come down here, “We are grateful that the American Christians came to see us, to stand beside us and to stand with us.”

THE GIFT OF PRESENCE

Why are many of us so excited by the Christmas season? In many cases it is because we get to be with loved ones and family. It is their presence that is the best gift of all.

I'm reminded of a phrase used by the Hallmark Card Company: "when you care enough to send the very best." When a person really cares they send the very best. They send themselves.

And that's what Christmas is really all about. God cared enough to send the very best. He sent himself into the world in the form of his Son, Jesus. The Bible tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Jesus was not God's messenger or representative. God was in Christ. That was what we really needed more than anything else. We needed God with us. And that is what we got.

A Protestant pastor reflected upon a very Roman Catholic prayer. Most of you know it. It goes, "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus."

My more rambunctious Catholic friends remember having to say lots of Hail Marys and Our Fathers as penance for breaking the rules at school.

But, when you really look at this prayer, you see that it is not a tool of penance or a prayer that belongs exclusively to the Roman Catholic Church.

It is a beautiful, biblical prayer based upon the message of the angel to Mary. But, it is also an expression of God's grace to us today.

I'm suggesting that instead of saying "Hail Marys" that we should be saying "Hail Franks" or "Hail Betsys" or whatever you name may be.

In that case the prayer would go something like this,
 "Greetings, Frank, full of grace,
 The Lord is with you.
 Blessed are you amongst people,
 and blessed is the fruit of your life, Jesus."

Can we really pray like this?

Think about it. Surely we believe in God's amazing grace. Don't we believe that God is with us even until the end of the age?

Aren't we blessed because the good news of the gospel is found in us? Don't we believe that the Spirit of Christ lives in and through us? If we do, we should make it personal

It happened long ago in Bethlehem, but it continues even today. In the name of Jesus we continue to bring a flesh and blood message of divine hope. Light continues to shine in our darkness.

Let us proclaim that message not only during the Christmas season but throughout the whole year.
Amen.