

“The Light of All People”

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¹In 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.

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. (John 1:1-14)

When I was living in Washington, D.C. right after college, a few friends and I planned a weekend camping trip up in the mountains of western Maryland. President Warren G. Harding used to take fairly regular trips to the same park back in the 1920's, although his camping trips usually included people like Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and Thomas Edison. The only thing our little band of brothers had in common with Harding's consortium of brilliant and powerful minds was the route we drove to the trailhead, and perhaps a love and respect of the outdoors.

We backpacked into the park for a few miles and found a good place to camp. After we had eaten supper and cleaned up, we sat around the fire talking. It was autumn – the night was chilly but still comfortable. And every now and then we would hear something out beyond the ring of light cast by our campfire. It was one of those sounds that you don't think about much, until you keep hearing it. The noise was a crunch – like the sound of a person taking a single step in the leaves.

Our conversation turned to what the sound might be. And the more we talked about it, the more we heard it. And before we knew it, there we were – four able-bodied men in their twenties — convinced that we were about to be attacked by any number of armed assailants. In our defense, it had not been long since a couple had been found murdered out on the Appalachian Trail. And back down in DC, there had been a spree of shootings on the interstate highways. These things had been all over the news, so it didn't take much to send our imaginations running in all kinds of dark directions.

Darkness can play all kinds of tricks on us. It can disguise the truth. It can make a shadow look like something it is not. It can create a spirit of fear that whispers a lie — the lie that the light we can see is weak... that the darkness seems deeper and more pervasive... that the little light we can see is sure to be outmatched and overcome.

In the language of the Bible, night is a time of danger. Darkness is associated with sin, deceit, faithlessness, and “unfruitful works,” all of which stand in contrast to the light of



faith, hope, and love. And Bible recognizes that is not really the darkness that we fear the most; it is the threats and perils that the darkness hides that shake us to the core.

It has always been this way, even there “in the beginning,” when the world was dark and chaotic and monsters lurked in the black chaos of the waters. But the Spirit of God was hovering over those dark waters, and the first words uttered by that Spirit were a divine imperative, “Let there be light.” The Gospel of John very intentionally connects the advent of that first celestial light with the advent of Christ, the coming of the Word who “became flesh and lived among us.” “What has come into being in him,” John says, “was life” ... and the “life was the *light* of all people.” And yes, the darkness is still there. But the new light comes with a promise that, whatever may come, the darkness will never be able to overcome it.

That, I would say, is the essence of Christmas faith. The angels, the shepherds, the manger, and the wise ones from the east, it all makes for a truly wonderful story. But the part to be claimed with faith is the conviction that we will trust in this light that came into the world – that even though it may seem as vulnerable as a candle in the wind, or a little campfire in the wilderness, that it is strong enough to give righteousness and goodness the win over anything and everything that may contend against it.

I heard a story one time about a mother whose little boy was terribly afraid of the dark. She wanted to help him move past it, so one night she asked him to go out to the back porch and fetch the broom for her. He looked outside and his eyes filled with dread. “Mom,” he said fearfully, “I don’t want to go out there. It’s dark.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of the dark,” she said. “Jesus is out there. He’ll look after you and protect you.”

The little boy thought a moment. “Are you sure he’s out there?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Jesus is everywhere, even in the dark, and he is always ready to help you when you need him,” she said.

The little boy walked slowly over to the back door. He pushed it open just a crack. Peering out into the darkness, he said, “Jesus? If you’re out there, would you mind handing me the broom?”

The truth is, no matter how old we get, the darkness never goes away. What changes is what we envision out there in it. If anything, age gives us more knowledge of all the monsters that can be lurking out there. There are things out there that we cannot control. There are enemies out there that we feel ill-equipped to face. And that is why our trust in the light of the world is, and always has been, a question of faith... which brings us back to four young Capitol Hill staffers huddled around a lame little campfire in the mountains of western Maryland.

It’s notable, I think, that the word the gospel of John chooses to describe the coming of the light carries with it an important layer of meaning that we could easily miss if we are not paying attention. We read in our English Bibles that the Word became flesh and “lived” or “dwelt” among us, but the literal translation of the Greek is more metaphorical. The Greek literally says that God “pitched a tent” with us. When seventy scholars got together in the 3rd century BCE to translate the Old Testament into Greek, this is the word that they used to describe the tabernacle, that huge traveling tent that the Israelites built and carried with them through the wilderness. So, when John said that the Word became flesh and “pitched a tent” with us, he meant that in Christ the *shekinah*, the fullness of the glory and

presence of God, was pleased to dwell and be present with humanity in a new and personal way. Wherever we may have pitched our little tents in the world... whatever storms may be raging above and around them... whatever darkness or enemy or threat may be surrounding them... Christ has come to set up camp right there with us. And with him comes light — the light of God, the light of understanding, the light of salvation and hope and everything that is good. And that light may seem weak at times, but it is there, and the darkness will never overcome it.

That is why, when people in difficult situations come to talk to me -- if they are depressed, or overwhelmed, or frightened, or angry -- I often ask them whether, in their darkness, they can see any shafts of light. Is there something -- a person, a cause, a hobby, a project — what in your life seems good, or pure, or right? If we look hard enough, we can always find a little light. And I urge them to go toward it... to grope their way to those little shafts of light. Because even when the light seems faint, there is power and hope in it, and God has promised that it will be stubborn enough, and strong enough, to lead you home.

Just to close the circle, it was rabbits. If you have been wondering what those sounds were around the campfire: rabbits. We found the evidence the next morning in little piles of pellets scattered around our camp. As it turned out, we had not needed to fear the darkness the way we did. But the darkness still plays all kinds of tricks on us. It still disguises the truth. It can still make a shadow look like something it is not. It can still whisper the lie that the darkness is greater than the light.

But don't you believe it! The Light of the World is here with us. The light is shining in, on, and around Larchmont Avenue Church. The church in every age has had its challenges, and this moment is no different. But the good news is that the living God, the One who was there in the beginning, the One who is and ever shall be, has come to pitch a tent with you and me. And his light is all around us. All we have to do is look for it, and follow it.

That is, after all, exactly what the “wise men from the East” did. This Thursday is Epiphany, the traditional ending of the twelve days of Christmas, the day on which we celebrate people who observed a new light in the sky at its rising. And they did more than just see it. They followed it. They had faith in it. They believed that it would lead them to a good place... a new place... a place of joy... a place that would change them and put them on another road. And it was true. All of it turned out to be true. This fresh New Year that we have been given... it begins with light – an invitation to look for it, to trust it, and to follow it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**