

# **The Light Shines in the Darkness**

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener

First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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*Service of Light*

John 1:1-9



I want you to try visualizing something I experience in my Pilates class. If we were in a different setting, I would ask you to stand up and recognize your ability to stand with relative ease. Then I would ask you to put one foot directly in front of the other, so they are heel to toe. Again, I would ask you to recognize your ability to stand even if it takes more effort to maintain your balance. Finally, I would ask you to close your eyes for three breaths while trying to maintain your balance. Spoiler alert, it is very difficult.

Why can we be standing still one moment and then with the simple act of closing our eyes, we lose our balance? We become unsteady because closing our eyes takes away the visual awareness that our brains use for equilibrium. When the light around us disappears, we can no longer register where we are in space. When we close our eyes, we lose our external references that help us navigate our way through the world. Without our vision, we struggle to find our internal compass. When we suddenly find ourselves in the dark, it causes us to be disoriented.

Life can bring all kinds of situations where darkness affects our internal compass, causing us to feel disoriented. Situations that cause people to say things like, "I am in a dark place." "This is a dark season." "It feels like darkness surrounds me." "It has been a dark day." "I am living in the shadows, trying to find the light." These are things I hear through conversations and texts and emails and tears.

You have probably heard similar comments, and if we were having a private conversation, most of you could describe a situation in your life where you feel this darkness. You might say it feels as if the weight of the world is resting on your shoulders or that anxiety has taken up permanent residence pressing upon your chest, and as we continued talking, you might convey the feeling of being in a long tunnel where the light at the far end seems to be getting smaller not larger.

This darkness can come from personal situations like strained relationships, physical issues, and unrelenting grief, or it can come from feeling the enormity of external circumstances like the pain our world experiences due to war, famine, and other injustices where people fail to see one another as God sees.

We sense this darkness but often struggle to define it. The best description I can offer is a heavy sense of disorientation. Before darkness falls, we feel like we have a plan. We know where we are in the world and generally where we want to go. We are balanced and know how to move in the world. Once darkness befalls us, it is as if we have lost our internal compass, we lose our center, and we no longer know which way to go.

Thankfully, darkness is where incarnation begins. From the darkness of the womb, Emmanuel is born. Light emerges from the darkness, but most don't like the dark and much prefer the light. We want to move through the dark tunnels of life as quickly as possible, but when we do this, we can miss what God offers us in the dark. We can miss how God is speaking to us in the darkness.

Let me pause to say, I do not believe God causes the darkness. God doesn't give you cancer or make your marriage fall apart or cause estrangement between family members. God doesn't orchestrate the darkness, but God can work through any situation. I know God speaks to us in the dark because God is always speaking. God is always drawing us into prayer, longing for us to hear that still small voice during the silence of our divine conversations. It is often in the darkness that we become most aware of God's presence, because it is there that our illusion of control falls away.

In the words of Jan Richardson, "If we lean too quickly toward the light, we miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this (Advent) season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. God's first priority is not to do away with the dark but to be present to us in it."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.larchetahomahope.org/darkness-is-where-incarnation-begins/>

God meets us. God's first priority is to meet us in the midst of our darkness for it is in the dark where the light most shines. Emmanuel came to us in a vulnerable babe born in the darkness of a stable to be the light of the world.

Too often when we think about light and darkness, we think in binaries. Light is good and darkness is bad, but that isn't necessarily true. All light is blinding, and all darkness is disorienting. The truth is that we need both light and darkness. Without darkness we wouldn't be able to see the light, and what is light when there is no darkness from which it shines.

Think back to our scripture from Matthew this morning. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as you wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." And when Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel commanded. God spoke to Joseph in the darkness. Then when he awoke in the light of day, Joseph took what he learned in the dark of night and acted on what he learned.

John's prologue shimmers with the light that God brings to our darkness, and the symbolism of light and darkness runs throughout John's gospel. In addition to the Word coming to life through the incarnation as the light of all people, Jesus later declares in chapter 8, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Then in chapter 12, Jesus says, "The light is with you for a little longer... believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

We are children of light. The Word came into being to bring life and to be the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The light shines *in* the darkness. It doesn't remove darkness from existence. It shines *in* it. Darkness is always present alongside the light. We can't experience the brightness of the light without the darkness from which it is illuminated.

Many times, the light isn't bright enough to illumine the full path, but it provides enough light to take that next right step and then the next and the next. Without the light, we can lose our internal compass and become disoriented.

You know this sense of disorientation. It can descend upon receiving a diagnosis or when grief is overwhelming. This disorientation descends when relationships that we thought would last forever disappear, when we don't know our next step after losing our job, and when things in our life, country, or world that we thought were foundational start to crumble around us. When darkness descends, we struggle to maintain our equilibrium.

There are times when losing the external references that help us navigate our way doesn't affect us as much. When we are grounded and not being pushed to our limits, we know how to keep moving in the world even when we lose sight of where we are. But when we are already pushed to our limits when the darkness descends, then we are in trouble.

When our stability wanes, and we feel as if we are walking a tightrope, with one foot directly in front of the other, heel to toe, we can easily lose our balance and become disoriented when darkness descends. This is when we most need the light to shine. This is when we need the light to steady us and guide us. This is when we long to hear God whisper into the silence, "Do not be afraid." This is when we need to remind ourselves that the light shines *in* the darkness. This is when we most need to trust that the Light of the World accompanies us in the shadows and through the long tunnels of life.

Darkness heightens our longing for light and reminds us—sometimes painfully—that we are not in control. And when we dare to acknowledge that truth, something holy happens. As we loosen our death grip on the illusion of control and name our disorientation, we make room for Christ. When we release what we cannot manage into God's care and open ourselves to vulnerability, that is when we embrace Christ—the light that shines in the darkness.

Friends, we are children of light. The Light meets us in our darkness and accompanies us along the way. As we go forth into the darkness on this longest night of the year, may we embrace the Christ who meets us and journeys with us as our light that shines *in* the darkness. May it be so. Amen.