

What's With the Lights?

John 1:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 26, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



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 overtake 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.

¹⁴And 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, NRSV)



What's with the lights?

The day after Halloween I'm coming home from a long day at work and I turn onto my street and I'm greeted with a most unexpected surprise. Christmas lights. *The day after Halloween!* It's crazy enough that the skeletons and pumpkins showed up this year in mid-September – did you notice that? – but now snowmen and candy canes are coming on the scene before the skeletons and pumpkins have made a timely exit.

I don't want this to become a rant – perhaps it's too late! – I only want to ask why? What's with the lights? Why is this such a big deal for so many people? It truly does not upset me that people start hanging Christmas

lights before they have even cooked their Thanksgiving turkey. If that's you, more power to you. I'm just curious. Why so eager? Regardless of *when* you hang up your lights, *why* do you hang them? What do those twinkling bulbs symbolize for people? Are they meant to be reminding us of something? If you went up to the guy down street this afternoon who will be stringing his gutters with lights and ask him why he was doing so, what do you think he will say to you? Is it all about tradition? Aesthetics? Impressing the neighbors? Delighting the grandchildren when they come over? Or is there something more to it?

The season leading up to Christmas is the darkest time of the year. On December 21st, the shortest day of the year, the sun will rise here in Sacramento at 7:19 in the morning and set at 4:48 in the afternoon. That's only 9½ hours of sunlight, compared to the almost 15 hours we enjoy here in late June. As Americans, we expect Christmas to come at a dark time of year. It's partly what makes the lights so appealing. I often wonder how it works for our friends in places like Australia, where Christmas shows up right in the middle of summer. I'm not sure I'd like that. For me, the darkness and light imagery of Christmas is more powerful in our part of the world. The lack of sunlight reminds us that Christ came to bring light into a very, very dark world.

Isaiah 9, one of those Old Testament prophetic passages we often read this time of year, puts it clearly:

**The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.¹**

Do you think that's an accurate description of our world, a land of deep darkness?

To be clear, when the Bible speaks about darkness in the world it is highlighting two things: ignorance and evil.² First, darkness promotes ignorance because when you are in the dark you can't see what is right before you. The other day I cracked my shin into a wooden stool that somebody left in the middle of a dark hallway. The fact that the somebody was me, made the pain even worse. The darkness hid from me what otherwise

¹ Isaiah 9:2. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² I'm indebted here to Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas* (Penguin Books, 2018), 6.

would have been evident. In a similar way, the reality of God in this world should be plainly evident to all of us, and yet we live in a world where many people are blind to this truth. Paul writes in Romans 1:20-21, **“Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened.”**

Darkness points to ignorance. It also points to evil. Which one of us can deny that the world is shrouded in evil? Yes, there is much beauty and goodness around us as well. Justice even shows up from time to time. But as Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright points out, these things always leave us wanting. Beauty fades. Goodness is tarnished or sporadic. Justice is temporary. It all leaves us with a nagging sense that this should not be so, that this world should be somehow different, more full of light rather than darkness. And yet, in his words, “After millennia of human struggle and searching and love and longing and hatred and hope and fussing and philosophizing, we still can’t seem to get much closer to it than people did in the most ancient societies we can discover.”³ After all these years since Isaiah first wrote those words, we still walk in a land of deep darkness.

How else do we explain what we see playing out in Israel and Palestine, not just now but for hundreds and hundreds of years leading up to now? The claim we continually hear is that if we would all just work together we could achieve peace in this world. Really? Don’t you look at the situation in the Middle East and find yourself feeling hopeless that there are any solutions that will ever lead to Jews and Palestinians living as peaceful neighbors in the long term? I’m not hopeful. And before you think I’m pointing fingers, for all the advances we have made in our part of the world, we ourselves are still a society infected by violence, racism, division, inequity, and depression. Closer to home, don’t we all have some sense of what it’s like to walk through the darkness of this world. Death steals one you love far before it was time. Dreams which once inspired are now shattered. Vows made to you have been betrayed. Your own failure, addictions and shortcomings enslave you, and as much as you’d like to free yourself, the bonds seem unbreakable.

The darkness in this world can be so overwhelming that many people use it as an excuse to dismiss God. So

many people declare that they simply cannot worship a God, or even believe in a God, who allows so much darkness. It’s an honest protest, and one you may have made yourself along the way. The problem, of course, is that when you turn your back on God because of the darkness, these questions don’t suddenly evaporate. Deny God, fine, but the darkness is still there, and now what resources do you have to face it?

We look to science, to technology, to medicine, to education, to our own resources to bring light. But do they? Have they? The most honest atheists among us admit that they have not. Bertrand Russell, perhaps last century’s most prominent and vocal atheist in the Western world, puts it this way,

Even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief...That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental [connections] of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins...Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.⁴

Put that on your Christmas card! It’s no wonder that in the darkness of our time we keep hanging lights to try to beat back the shadows.

As you might know, themes of light and darkness are prominent all throughout scripture, including in the passage we just read from John 1. In fact, the Bible opens with darkness. We are told that before creation, **“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”**⁵ But then, what is the very first thing God creates: **“Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”**⁶ All at once the darkness was scattered. And when the biblical story ends, it also ends in light. In other words, for all its efforts the darkness never makes a full comeback. Revelation 22 describes the last day when all things are restored: **“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”**⁷ In

³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (Harper, 2006), 6.

⁴ Cited by Keller, 9.

⁵ Genesis 1:2

⁶ Genesis 1:3

⁷ Revelation 22:5

between these two beacons, the image of light makes nearly 200 appearances. It's one of the Bible's most common and complex symbols, pointing us to life, power, goodness, blessing, truth, and ultimately God himself.⁸ This morning I want to emphasize three things I believe this image of light teaches us, especially in light of (no pun intended) the darkness of this world.

First, the image of light reminds us that God is the source and sustainer of all life. John 1 declares that it was through the Word, who is Christ, that all things came into being. Because Christ is God, he is eternal. You may not think of Jesus, the Son of God, as the creator of the world, but we must. Bethlehem was not his beginning. **"In the beginning was the Word..."** John then makes clear in verse 3 that, **"What has come into being in [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of all people."** Christ is the light, and that light is the source of all life.

The center of our physical universe is the sun, not just positionally but existentially. In other words, life on this earth is not possible without the sun, at least for long. Take the sun away and eventually existence would become dark, cold and lifeless. In a similar but much more expansive way, if Christ removed his hand, his sustaining presence, from our world it would cease to flourish, even exist. As Paul put it in Acts 17, **"In him we live and move and have our being."**⁹

Today is Christ the King Sunday. Traditionally held on the last Sunday before Advent, it's a feast day set aside to celebrate the full authority of Christ as King and Lord of all creation. Light itself has properties of rulership over the universe. In Genesis 1:16 we read, **"God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars."** And so the first thing the image of light in scripture teaches us is that the God revealed to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, is sovereign over creation. There is no life created, and no life sustained, apart from Christ. Think of the massive implications of this reality.

The next two things that this image of light teaches us about God can be summed up in the description of Jesus given here in verse 14. John tells us that Christ came into our world **"full of grace and truth."** Let me take these in reverse order.

The second thing light teaches us about here is truth. Light exposes. Agreed? If somebody says, "I want to shed a light on this situation!", what do they mean? They want to get to the truth of matter. Why do so many crimes get committed in the shadows, or under

the cover of darkness? We keep things in the dark when we don't want those things exposed. The light brings things into view, exposes lies, reveals secrets, solves mysteries.

To talk about Christ as the Light of the Word it to declare that he comes to expose the truth. To begin with, in Christ we finally see what God is truly like. Do you wonder what God is actually like? Wonder no more. Look at Jesus and you are looking at God. The things Jesus says are the things God says. The way Jesus loves and forgives, that's how God loves and forgives. What's important to Jesus is important to God. As Paul puts it in Colossians 1:5, **"[Christ] is the image of the invisible God."**

The light of Christ also reveals the truth about what *we* are like. It does this first by showing us what we are *supposed to be like*. Do you ever wonder how human beings are supposed to live? Wonder no more. Look at Jesus and you see how you and I are supposed to live. The way Jesus loves his Father in Heaven, orients his entire life – heart, mind, soul, and strength – around his Father, that is how we are supposed to love God. The way Jesus loves his neighbors – all his neighbors! – that is the way we are supposed to love the people around us in this world. And so what does this truth expose about us? It exposes just how inhumane we have become. It exposes the darkness in us.

The English writer and theologian G.K. Chesterton once responded to this question posed in the local newspaper: "What's wrong with the world?" Chesterton's response?

Dear Sir,
I am.
Yours, G.K. Chesterton

This comes back to the darkness that Isaiah spoke about all those years ago, the deep darkness which covers our land. Any honest assessment cannot deny this truth. Our main problem, however, is not the darkness itself but our insistence that we can diffuse it by ourselves when we are part of the problem. In his book, *Hidden Christmas*, Pastor Tim Keller quotes from a *New York Times* advertisement that ran some years ago: "The meaning of Christmas is that love will triumph and that we will be able to put together a world of unity and peace."¹⁰ Really? Don't hold your breath.

But remember, when Christ came into the world he came full of truth, yes, but also full of grace. Though we cannot find our way out of the shadows on our own,

⁸ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit & Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 509-512.

⁹ Acts 17:28

¹⁰ Keller, 7.

and don't even deserve to find our way out, Christ is one who enters into the deepest darkness anyway, and then dispels it on our behalf. St. Francis said years ago, "All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle." He's right. Darkness does not and cannot dispel light. It has no power over light. And once light is on the scene, the darkness is not only stripped of its power, it is stripped of its existence. What we could never do for ourselves, Christ has done for us. **"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."**

It's not by accident that these images of darkness and light are woven through the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark's account of the crucifixion includes this stunning detail, **"When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon."**¹¹ By all appearances, darkness is consuming the Light of the World as he is snuffed out on the cross. In a matter of hours, the sun sets on Palestine as the lifeless body of Jesus is laid in the tomb, condemned to darkness as the stone is sealed in place to keep out the light.

I've never thought about this until recently, but it actually wouldn't have made much sense if Jesus rose from the dead in the middle of the afternoon. Can you picture the women discovering the empty grave after lunch? Every Gospel account makes clear that it was still dark outside when Mary and the others came to the tomb. But not for long. On the horizon I imagine there must have been the first pale traces of the sun getting ready to rise.¹² And as the sun in the heavens rose that morning, so did the Son of God who came from Heaven. Light shining in the darkness, and now shining for good. At one point earlier Jesus had declared about himself, **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."**¹³ On Easter Sunday morning he backed it up.

It's not lost on me that in this passage from John 1 we are told in verses 6-9 that John the Baptist was sent into the world **"as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."** It's not only John, you know, but all of us who have come to know Christ who are called to bear witness to the Light of the World to others around us whose lives, at times, can seem to be consumed by darkness.

To so many people you know, life seems disjointed, purposeless, even vulnerable and utterly fragile. Might it be good news to discover that Christ, the Light of the World, is the creator and sustainer of this world who is actually moving with great purpose and determination in our world to set things right?

Not everybody around you wants to know the truth, some preferring the ignorance that darkness affords. But not all. Some people you know are genuinely open to the truth that comes with the Light of the Word, even if some of that truth is initially hard to hear. Yes, it's true that we are stuck in the darkness, but this is truth which comes hand in hand with grace. Those who welcome the Light of the World find the once-impenetrable, often self-inflicted darkness suddenly vulnerable. Hope emerges.

I'm not exactly sure why most people put up Christmas lights. Don't get me wrong, I like that they do, even if some get strung a bit too early. But perhaps God wants to use us to help others recover the true reason. Maybe God even wants to use us to help one another recover the reason!

Though these images of light and dark are endlessly profound, I'd like to leave you with something simple to consider. How might you bear witness to the light of Christ this season to those around you who are weary of the darkness? I could give you a list of ways you might do so, and challenge you to choose one. Instead, I think I'd prefer to get out of the way and encourage you to let God lead you here.

Who do you know that is going through a particularly dark time? Into what small corner of darkness might God call you to go and shine light? Where are truth and grace needed? How might you testify to the Light of the World so that others might believe in him through you? What would it look like this Christmas season (and beyond) to bear witness to the light which creates, sustains, exposes truth, and extends grace? The lights all around us this season are beautiful. They are even more beautiful for those who come to know the one towards whom they point.

Amen.

¹¹ Mark 15:33

¹² I'm borrowing here from Fredrick Buechner and his description of darkness in *Whistling in the Dark* (Harper & Row, 1988), 32-33.

¹³ John 8:12



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Just for fun, what do you think is the proper time to start putting up Christmas decorations? Defend your position with logic or (if possible) biblical evidence.
2. Read John 1:1-14. Pay special attention to the images here about light and darkness. What stands out to you?
3. Isaiah says our world is a “land of deep darkness” (Isaiah 9:2). Do you agree?
4. In John 8:12 Jesus declared, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”** What do you think he means by this? How is Jesus the light of the world?
5. What is one specific way that Christ has been a light in your life recently? Perhaps by exposing the truth, overcoming darkness, showing the way, or extending blessing?
6. C.S. Lewis once connected God and light this way: “We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else...I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen—not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. We cannot see light, though by light we see things.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. What is one way that you believe you are to ‘bear witness’ to the light of Christ to others around you in this world who may be still frustrated by the darkness? Be as specific as you can.
8. What is the message you believe that Christ is speaking to you here? How will that lead you to think or act differently?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



When we hang or see the lights on our homes and trees this Christmas, what should they remind us to think about?