

His Light, Our Life

Text: John 1: 4-5, 9; Isaiah 9: 2

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Christmastide II, January 5, 1986

Transcription of the spoken sermon

All that came to be was alive with His life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it.... The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world. John 1: 4-5, 9

The prophet, announcing the birth of a child destined to be a Deliverer of his people, a foreshadowing of the Child the Deliverer, cried out,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light: Light has dawned upon them, dwellers in a land as dark as death. Isaiah 9: 2

The world has always known darkness, darkness that describes the tragedy and disaster that seems in every age to be present, a people living under the shadow of death. There is always enough darkness to go around. People cannot find their way; nations threaten, posture, and maneuver. One-upmanship is common in interpersonal relations. Anxious people, driven people, ruthless people, restless people. The world certainly knows enough darkness to go around.

The newspapers and news magazines are full of the chronicle of the world's darkness. It is darkness that makes for news and we are bombarded with it daily— on the hour—even in continual stream from the news networks.

Terrorism is the darkening shadow over our world. Ironically, it would seem that the super powers are at a standoff; we've looked at the horror of a nuclear winter and realized a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought, to use our President's words. But what will we do with Khadafy? What if it is proven that it was Libyan agents that engineered the brutal murders at Rome and Vienna? Saudi Arabia has warned against military retaliation, claiming it will only escalate the round of terrorist activity and, I must say, I think they are right.

A Jew once said, "They that live by the sword shall die by the sword," but Israel has determined she will live by the sword and we stand in admonition of her ability to retaliate. But does that stop terrorism? Does it not only move it up a notch? Where will it end? Last evening's news showed the most recent graduates of a splinter PLO group for whom Arafat is not militant enough. Their training complete in the Syrian mountains, they are ready to die for the cause of Palestinian liberation; their commitment is total, their fanatical zeal frightening.

Khadafy says if we strike Libya he will bring the war to the streets of Middle America. And, of course, he will.

Darkness.

There is always enough personal darkness to go around, as well. Tension, betrayal, brokenness, grief—pain of a deeply personal nature is carried about by so many. Few of us escape deep wounds; most of us inflict deep hurt along the way.

Darkness.

This is the twelfth day of Christmas. This evening is called Twelfth Night. In some places gifts will be exchanged. Tomorrow is the day of Epiphany. The word means "manifestation." The sign is a star; the central motif is "Light". Epiphany follows hard on Christmas because Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation—The Word became flesh—and the Word in flesh was Light to the World.

The prophet announced the birth of a boy who would be a King and Deliverer. A ray of light scattered Israel's darkness.

The Psalmist sang of the Lord, His Light and His salvation in the midst of life's severe testings.

Light is a major theme of John's Gospel. Darkness shrouds, hides, mystifies, provides a cover for all manner of evil. Light reveals, clarifies, opens up, illuminates.

Some years ago while traveling in California we were driving to Yosemite National Park where we had reservations for the night. Being unfamiliar with the territory and trying to do too many things along the way, night came and darkness fell before we reached our destination. Road signs were few. I thought I was going in the right direction but I was uncertain. It was very dark and totally unfamiliar; I proceeded with all the anxiety that accompanies such uncertainty. We twisted and turned and traveled on, seeming to be descending. And we were. Although I did not know it, we were descending into a cavernous canyon with walls of sheer rock.

I had never before "felt" the darkness. It was almost tangible. Finally we came on a light, a sign, and we arrived at the lodge. But where we were or what the environment was, I had no idea except that it was the blackest darkness I had ever known.

In the morning I stepped out of the room to see where in the world I was and it was a startling moment, for I stepped out in dazzling sunlight and found I was in a very deep canyon. Behind the lodge was a wall of sheer rock towering skyward. And falling from its height was a magnificent waterfall. The whole world was transformed by the rising sun, the coming of the Light. The darkness was dissipated; no more was there a sense of foreboding. Everything was transformed; the light had come.

Epiphany is the celebration of the Light that came into the world at Christmas. The Word was made flesh and the flesh was the person of Jesus who said, "I am the Light of the world".

John's Gospel uses certain ideas with which to tell the story of Jesus. Two words used in close cooperation are light and life. The prologue to the Gospel (verses 1-18) is a magnificent portrayal of God's movement out of eternity creating the cosmos, our time and space, and then moving into that very time and space to claim creation as her own. The themes with which John will build his Gospel find expression in this opening section and here we find his claim that the Word was life and that life was the Light of humankind.

Listen:

All that came to be was alive with His life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it....The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world. John 1: 4-5, 9

Beginning before creation, portraying creation as the cosmic framework for the revelation of Himself, building to the climactic statement of verse 14, "The Word became flesh", we have the deepest truths of God, the cosmos and the human family revealed. What an amazing story is here unfolded; here we have the miracle and mystery of Christmas and Epiphany conjoined. Here we are told that God is the source of the world's life and that in the revelation of Himself we have light.

In the climactic statement of 1:14, "The Word became flesh", or, as we might more simply state it "The Word became a human person" we have an amazing declaration. *We are told that the mind and heart and deepest being of God came to expression in the humanity of Jesus.* The first movement from the depths of God's being out of the depth of eternity was the movement of creation. John's claim is that what came to expression in Jesus, in the beginning, had come to expression in creation itself. God's Word—His mind, creative intention, will and

loving nature was expressing itself in the creation of the world. We cannot miss this for John begins as Genesis begins:

In the beginning...

God is manifesting Himself in the creation of the world. God is manifesting Himself most fully and completely in the creation of Jesus—In Jesus what comes to expression in the fullest expression of God's intention in creation.

In the film, "The Creation of the Universe" run recently on public television, the most eminent scientists of the world, some studying the cosmos through radio telescopes and some studying the intricacies of the nuclei of the atom, spoke of the quest for the one unifying formula or concept that lies at the mystery of the structure of all reality. They declared that when discovered it will be both profoundly beautiful and profoundly simple. A spark of energy, smaller than an atom, we are told, exploded into the Big Bang and the whole expanding cosmic drama continues as its unfolding. Those standing on the threshold of reality's secrets evidence an appropriate awe before the mystery and grandeur of the creation. Some seem open to spelling the heart of the mystery GOD.

The God who in the beginning called all things into being was giving expression to His idea, His Word, His will. The *Logos*, the mind and heart and will of God, were expressing themselves in the creation of the cosmos. The inner Being of God was flowing out into the world.

At the critical moment, in the fullness of time, the Inner Being, the Logos, the Word became flesh. The Word became a human person!

That is the miracle of Christmas. God in human form; God within the structures of time and space; God in our history, one of us. Emmanuel. The creative movement of God in creating the cosmos moved even more dramatically in that the very Being of God now became incarnate in Jesus.

Thus the amazing truth is that

Seeing into the face of Jesus is seeing into the heart of God.

This truth was expressed by the writer of the Hebrews:

When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in the Son whom he has made heir to the whole universe, and through whom he created all orders of existence: the Son who is the effulgence of God's splendor and the stamp of God's very being. Hebrews 1: 1-3

The same theme is sounded here as in John's prologues.

Paul wrote the following:

The whole universe has been created through him and for him and He exists before everything, and all things are help together in him.... For in him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell.

Colossians 1: 17-19

That is an amazing conception of things! Again the same theme is expressed. The God whose idea, reason, Word brought into being creation, now finds expression in Jesus, a human person.

Again:

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all being comes, towards whom we move; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came to be, and we through him. I Corinthians 8: 6

And again in one of my favorite statements:

For the same God who said, "out of darkness let light shine," has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation – the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. II Corinthians 5: 6

The One, True and Eternal God is the Creator, and is our Saviour! Out of the abyss of His Being flows creation's wonder, the human family in His image, and, Jesus, in whom His fullness dwells and in whom we see into the Father's heart.

Light is the symbol of God's life giving, creative action. The light took the human form of Jesus, and, now here is the great, hopeful affirmation of the Gospel

*The light shines in the darkness
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John loved to use words with a double meaning. The word "overcome" can also mean "comprehend". The text could be translated that way, meaning the world simply does not understand God's action. And that is true.

At the darkest moment of human history, as He was being crucified, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

And they didn't. And we so often do not. And the terrorists do not. And the darkness reigns.

But not completely; for the promise of the Gospel is—now translated "overcome"—that the light shines on in the darkness and the darkness has not—nor ever will it—overcome the light.

Child of God, the world is still full of darkness; but the light shines on, and will shine on until that day when all the earth and the whole cosmos will be ablaze with Light.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world. He who believes in me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life." (John 8:12)

His life, our Light, now and forever.

Thanks be to God Who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ!

Amen.