

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2020

Light In The Darkness

You have only to drive through almost any neighborhood at this time of year to see houses decorated with string after string of outdoor lights. A friend recently told me about two houses near his home where the owners appear to be having a contest to see which one can put up the most lights. It's pretty, he says, but they have "gone crazy."

There's no question but that Christmas is a time of lights. Even our Advent wreath led us toward Christmas with increasing amounts of light as one more candle was lit each Sunday. And today, of course, we have the Christ candle aflame.

Actually though, Christmas is not just about light, but also about darkness. It was in the darkness of night that the glory of angels appeared to the shepherds. It was in a dark sky that a bright star led wise men to the baby. And it was in a dark period of history that Jesus, whom John the gospel writer calls the light of the world, came to earth. At that time, slavery was widespread in the society. The poor, the handicapped, the aged and others were not cared for. It was a society in which a despot on the throne could order the slaughter of Jewish infants under the age of two, and no one could do anything about it. It was an age of darkness.

So, it was against that dark tableau that Jesus came. John put it like this: “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Phillips Brooks, an American preacher of the 19th century, visited the Holy Land shortly before Christmas one year. On Christmas Eve, he made the trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on horseback, and saw the little city lit up against the darkness of the gathering night. Remembering that sight a year or two later, he wrote some verses for the children of his church to sing, and the church organist composed a tune to go with them. That song has become a standard for Christmas:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by,
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light ...

The message that Jesus is light against the darkness is one that we still need to hear today, because we too know something about darkness. We have only to mention the name Columbine to bring it to mind. Or we can think about terrorists at work in the Mideast or hate groups here in America.

And then there are news stories like this one I read not long ago. During a January in Chicago, a blind man, who had just been to an eye clinic, was trying to find the bus stop to get home, but because it was snowing hard, his usual landmarks were hidden.

He was feeling in the snow for a familiar landmark when a young woman and her boyfriend spotted him. They stopped their car and offered him a ride home. After he was in the car, however, they drove to the waterfront along Lake Michigan where they proceeded to rob him of his cash, a welfare check and his tape recorder that he used to make notes and keep instructions. They also took his pocket radio and his Braille calculator.

Perhaps worst of all, they took his walking stick that he used to find his way. Then they drove off, leaving him standing in deep snow, not knowing where he was, with the January wind whipping around him.

Regrettably, stories like that appear all too often in our news. Ours too, is dark age. Since Jesus has already come, we can be excused for asking why the light he brought, and about which John wrote so lyrically, has not dispelled the darkness of wrongdoing, hatred and suffering. We believe in the light of God, but we know that the darkness is real too.

Our Christmas dreams of peace on earth and goodwill toward all have limits placed on them by the reality of the night in which Christmas light shines. If we look carefully at the Christmas story, we see that the Star of the East did not light up the whole night and drive the darkness away. Instead, it gave enough light to guide the Magi through the darkness to the place where Jesus lay.

As John said, the light shines in the darkness. It does not eradicate it, at least

not yet. But neither can the darkness overcome the light.

It is important that we do not translate the message of Christmas into some future promise. Normally, when things are dark, we can look forward to the dawn eventually coming. But Christmas focuses on the light of God present through Christ right now.

It is also important that we do not allow ourselves to believe that either the darkness or the light is simply a passive thing. Darkness, as John's gospel pictures it, is not just the absence of light. Rather it is actively hostile to the light of God. On the cross, when Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" it was likely because the darkness of this world was attacking his spirit and making him feel forsaken by God. Darkness is hardly passive. But if darkness is an active, hostile force, light is an active, benevolent force. Believe it or not, a recent marketing study seems to confirm the power of light, especially natural light. According to a report by the Rocky Mountain Institute, Snowmass, Colorado, increasing exposure to daylight in places of business results in fewer days lost to absenteeism and fewer errors on the part of workers.

In 1993, for example, Wal-Mart opened a store in Lawrence, Kansas. The architects for that job had specified that nine special skylights be installed in the roof, but to hold down construction costs, Wal-Mart decided to install the skylights in only half the roof, leaving the other half with artificial light. But something that happened after the store opened got management's attention. In every Wal-Mart store, each cash register is connected back to the

corporation's headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. Watching those registers, they discovered that sales were significantly higher in the day-lit half. And not only that, but they were higher than in the same departments in other Wal-Mart stores.

Now I'm hardly suggesting that the light of Christ came to increase our Gross National Product, but I am pointing out that light has a power to affect behavior. You see, Christianity views darkness not so much as an outside force as a drive within us that urges us to disregard God.

In the little crossroads community of Gustavus, Ohio, a fine old house is situated across the highway from the church building. From the front window of the house, the family living there could see the church and the village green in front of it. From the side window, they looked at the town hall, and next to it, an evergreen tree. At Christmas time, what the family saw as they looked out those two windows were symbols of Christmas. On the village green, there was a life-sized nativity scene erected by the church folks. In the town-hall yard, the live evergreen tree was decorated with Christmas lights by the village officials, and it served as the community Christmas tree.

One Christmas season, some person or persons, under the cover of darkness, snuck into the town-hall yard and cut the decorated tree down.

They left it lying on the ground, still lit up. You see, some people don't want

to be reminded of the everlasting light of God.

Perhaps the perpetrators of this deed didn't think of it that way, but it really was more than a childish prank. It was an expression of the darkness in their hearts and how far they were from Christ who is the light of the world.

The family could see the tree from their house, but they could also see the nativity scene. There was a spotlight on the scene that burned all the time. During the daylight, it added nothing to the scene, but in the darkness of night, the spot of light glorified the nativity. Ironically, it was the very darkness, the symbol of chaos and wrong, that made the light so dramatic in its effect.

So, to, the light that is Christ came not just for the quiet streets of Bethlehem, but also to illuminate the chaotic byways of bedlam. Thus, even when our lives are disordered, falling apart or affected by the darkness of our sin or someone else's, the light of Christ is for us. It is in the agony of dark streets that the everlasting light is most powerfully demonstrated. Jesus' coming did not eliminate darkness, but it did light up a way through it.

Jesus himself said it, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."