

SERMON TITLE: "Light in the Darkness"
SERMON TEXT: John 1:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 19, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

There's so much to love about Christmas: the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love; connecting with family and friends; the generosity of gift-giving; festive clothing and decorations; wonderful music; and special foods and holiday goodies. Oh, and did I mention the lights? There's something so meaningful about lighting the candles on the Advent wreath and holding up our individual candles as we sing "Silent Night" in the Christmas Eve service.

Outside the church, as well, everywhere you go there are colored bulbs and strings of white lights glowing from windows and eaves and bushes and trees. At the darkest time of the year, lights are brightening up some neighborhoods in megawatt style. Even before these modern days of electricity, there was the light of the ancient star in the east that led the wise men to Jesus. And, although the Bible doesn't exactly say that the angelic host was accompanied by light, all that "glory of the Lord" certainly enlightened the shepherds out in their field that dark night. Maybe it was like that surprising thunder and lightning we had with the snow on Tuesday night.

Of course, the Christmas emphasis on lights comes not so much from the stories of shepherds, angels, stars, and wise men as from the more basic Christmas message of the divine light who came into the world in the human form of Jesus Christ. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had written, "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" (9:2). Along that same line of thinking, the Gospel of John tells us that God's light which was present in creation had come into the world in a new way. The Word became flesh and lived among us, so that we might see light in the darkness.

1—LIVING IN DARKNESS

The importance of light is most obvious in this season of winter when we are living in darkness. This weekend's clear skies allow us to see the sun and the full moon. But did you notice this past week how the low angle of the sun and the grey snow clouds overhead combined to make it seem kind of dark, even in the daytime? As I was out driving, I noticed that more cars had their headlights on, even in the middle of the day. And, of course, we're approaching the winter solstice, so Tuesday, December 21, will be the longest darkness of the year. Think what life was like many centuries ago, when people only had fires or candles or oil lamps. The nights of winter would have been excruciatingly long—especially in the northernmost parts of the hemisphere.

That cold darkness has provided a setting for many Christmas carols. The song we've been singing as our offertory response begins with this verse:

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
 earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
 snow had fallen, snow on snow,
 in the bleak midwinter, long, long ago.¹

In another Christmas carol, the savior is said to have come "amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night."²

Of course, darkness isn't just the physical problems associated with cold weather and poor visibility. Darkness is also a state of mind and emotions. Sometimes we call it SAD, which stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder. That's what happens to us when we don't get enough light. For some of us, the winter blues are just a matter of slowing down a bit, having a little less energy, eating too many carbohydrates, and wanting to stay snuggled in bed a while longer. For others of us, SAD is a major depressive disorder that keeps us from enjoying and participating in life. The darkness is a serious mental and emotional enemy.

Darkness can come upon us for other reasons too. Death of a loved one creates darkness. Physical illness brings on darkness. Workplace troubles, marital discord, financial crisis, loneliness,

addiction, children flirting with danger, increasing dementia, caregiving responsibilities, and pandemic fatigue can flood us with dreary despair. The darkness of temptation and sin can also rob us of light. Such conditions of darkness can come any time of the year, but when they attack in the bleak midwinter, the darkness seems even greater.

2—JESUS IS LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

The amount of daylight is different at every latitude. Here in Ogden, the daylight on Tuesday will last 9 hours, 12 minutes, and 2 seconds. Fortunately, that's only seven less seconds of daylight than today. And, once we get past Tuesday, daylight will begin increasing again. By December 31, we will have 3 ½ more minutes of daylight. And by January 31, we'll have 41 more minutes of daylight.³ Tuesday may be the official start of winter, but—by the time we celebrate Christmas on Saturday—we will have once again survived the longest night of darkness and will be headed toward the glorious warmth and light of spring.

It's no surprise to me that early Christians associated Jesus' birthday with the winter solstice. They didn't have any way to know the real date of his birth, so why not celebrate the coming of the divine light of the world at the very time when light was needed most? Why not give hope to a world that lay in darkness, by reminding them that—as surely as the warmth of the sun will return to the earth—so will the spiritual light of God's holy presence be felt among the people.

The Gospel of John doesn't tell the story of Jesus' birth the way Luke and Matthew do—with angels, shepherds, and wise men. But John does have a lot to say about Jesus coming as the light of the world. The Christmas message for John is the truth that God's divine power has entered the world in a transforming way. No more will darkness be in control. No more will sin or sickness have the final say. No more will evil and hatred prevail. In John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Written in that same tradition and style of John, the Book of Revelation indicates that “in the heavenly Jerusalem, there will come a day when light will have triumphed completely and there will be no darkness.”⁴ Revelation tells us that the heavenly “city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb . . . and there shall be no night there” (Rev. 21:23-25).

3—CHOOSING TO WALK IN THE LIGHT

As long as this world exists, the North Pole will still tilt away from the sun on its annual cycle. We will still have to brace ourselves for long winter nights. We will still find our emotions drawn down in the dumps by situations beyond our control. And we will still be tempted to give in to the darkness of evil. But the good news is that Jesus Christ has been born as the light of the world, and that light can do a lot to overcome the darkness of our spirits.

A little bit of spiritual light goes a long way in improving dark areas of our lives. There’s an old story about a farmer who was upset with his farmhand for taking an oil lantern with him when he went out courting. The farmer said, “I don’t see no reason why you need to burn that expensive oil. I never took no lamp with me when I went courtin’.” With a glance across the yard at the farmer’s unusually homely wife, the farmhand nodded and said, “Yessir. And that’s precisely why I druther make my choice in the light.”⁵

The spiritual illumination of Christ gives us power to choose the good over the bad, the right over the wrong. The light of Christ allows us to choose love of God and neighbor instead of hatred and apathy. There’s no question that we’ll have to wait for the end of time for all the evil and gloom to disappear. But a significant portion of the darkness we experience can be transformed through the presence of Jesus right here and right now—if we choose to accept him and receive him into our hearts.

One of the newer Advent carols in our hymnal says,

I want to walk as a child of the light.

I want to follow Jesus.
 God set the stars to give light to the world.
 The star of my life is Jesus.
 In him there is no darkness at all.
 The night and the day are both alike.
 The Lamb is the light of the city of God.
 Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.⁶

The radiance of Christ penetrates the darkness best when we choose to let him in. When we want to walk as a child of the light, when we want to follow Jesus, that's when we'll see light in the darkness.

CONCLUSION

If it were up to me, I'd live in June and July all year round. I like the daylight. Unfortunately, that's not how the world works. But I'm encouraged by the Christmas message that Christ brings brightness into the world even in the gloomiest times. When we're experiencing grief, sickness, doubt, or depression, I'm glad John 1:5 says that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." I rejoice that the Word of God came in human flesh, so I can see the illumination of Christ in my very own human predicaments. In this week before Jesus' birth, I pray that we may all see and celebrate the divine light which shines in the darkness.

¹ "In the Bleak Midwinter," words by Christina G. Rossetti, 1872.

² "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," 15th cent. German; translated by Theodore Baker, 1894.

³ <https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/usa/ogden?month=1&year=2022>

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII, Anchor Bible: Vol. 29*, (Doubleday & Co: New York, 1966), p. 516.

⁵ Paraphrase of a story found at www.sermonillustrations.com, "Light."

⁶ "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light," by Kathleen Thomerson, 1966; c. 1970, 1975 Celebration.