

SERMON TITLE: "Light in the Darkness"
SERMON TEXT: John 1:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 25, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Were you here last night for our Christmas Eve service? Wasn't it lovely? I like every part of a Christmas Eve service, but my favorite part is when we light the individual candles, turn down the electric lights, and sing *Silent Night*. There's something about that candlelight in the darkness that is so sacred and moving. Maybe there are some of you here this morning, though, who didn't come last night because you have trouble seeing and driving after dark. Or maybe you're just more of a morning person. Maybe, for you, the sacred and spiritual times are better experienced in the light of Christmas Day.

Light is an important part of our Christmas celebration. Not only do we light candles at church, but everywhere you go there are colored bulbs and 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 our modern days of electricity, the angelic glory of the Lord shown around the shepherds out in their field at night, and the light of an ancient star led the wise men to Jesus.

Of course, the emphasis on light comes not so much from the stories of the angels, shepherds, and wise men as from the more basic Christmas message of the divine light which came into the world as the human being Jesus Christ. The Prophet Isaiah had once said, "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 the light in the darkness.

1—LIVING IN DARKNESS

The importance of God's light is most obvious in this dark season of winter. When the sun comes up late and goes down early, there isn't much time to get things done outside. Even indoors with the lights on, it can seem dreary and subdued when the sun is so far to the south. Think what life was like many centuries ago, when people only had fires, candles, or oil lamps. Without lights and electric devices like radios and TVs, 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

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, 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 and grief in our family creates darkness. Physical illness puts a cloud over our head. Troubles at work, marital discord, financial crisis, loneliness, addiction, children in rebellion, worry and responsibility for handicapped relatives, or spouses losing their independent abilities—all these situations can flood us with dreary despair. Such conditions of darkness can come any time of the year, but when they attack in the bleak midwinter, the darkness is even greater.

2—JESUS IS LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Wednesday, December 21, was the winter solstice. In fact, 2:48 p.m. Mountain Standard Time was the exact moment when the North Pole was tipped farthest away from the sun. That shortest day of the year varies in length depending on how far north or south you are. In Honolulu, the solstice light lasted for nearly 11 hours. In Los Angeles, the time between sunrise and sunset was close to 10 hours. Here in Ogden, we had nine hours and 12 minutes of daylight. In Anchorage, Alaska, the shortest day of the year only provided six hours of daylight.²

What if you were a person living in very ancient, maybe even prehistoric times? Can you imagine what it would have been like to have had your daylight slipping away from you, with the darkness increasing each day? How could you be sure that it wouldn't just get darker and darker and darker until there was no light at all?

Now that you've thought about that shortest day and longest night, imagine what it would be like when you started to notice that the pattern was changing. No longer was the *darkness* increasing; instead, the *light* was increasing! Hallelujah! You were now headed toward the glorious warmth and life-giving light of spring!

Today we aren't so in tune with the earth and sky as our ancient ancestors, so you may not have realized it yet. But today is actually going to have 32 seconds more light than Wednesday did. By next Sunday, January 1st, Ogden's daylight will last four minutes and five seconds longer than the shortest day. By February 4, we will have a whole hour more daylight than we did on the winter solstice.³

After thinking about the practical realities of daylight, can you imagine what it would have been like to live at the time of Jesus' birth and experience this transition from deepening darkness to increasing light? It's no surprise to me that Christians soon associated Jesus' birthday with the winter solstice. They didn't have any way to know the real date of Jesus' 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. But John does have a lot to say about Jesus coming as light to 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 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.” The book of Revelation, written in the tradition of John, indicates that “in the heavenly Jerusalem, there will come a day when light will have triumphed completely and there will be no darkness.”⁴

3—CHOOSING TO WALK IN THE LIGHT

As long as this world still exists, the North Pole will still tilt away from the sun on its annual cycle. We will still have to brace ourselves for long, cold 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 right now.

On Wednesday evening, did you get to watch and hear the speech given by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy? I was so moved by how and what he said. One of his lines that caught my attention was that, when the Ukrainian people are using candlelight in the darkness, “it isn’t because they’re trying to be romantic.” It’s because the Russians keep blowing up their means to generate electricity. President Zelenskyy was here asking for continued American support because Ukrainians don’t want to live in the dark. They choose to live in the light of electricity, the light of freedom, and the light of democracy. Over and over again in his speech, Zelenskyy referred to Christmas, and it’s no wonder. The light of Christ’s hope, peace, joy, and love is what we all need in this cold dark winter.

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

CONCLUSION

One of the newer 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.⁵

At Christmas, we celebrate that the radiance of Christ has the power to penetrate our darkness. The light of Christ can do that 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 will, for sure, see light in the darkness.

¹Christina G. Rosetti, 1872, "In the Bleak Midwinter," UMH #221.

²www.time.unitarium.com

³www.timeanddate.com

⁴Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 1-XII* in *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 29 (Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY: 1966), p. 516.

⁵Kathleen Thomerson, "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light," 1966, c. 1970, 1975 Celebration, UMH #206.