

Jesus the Light

Christmas 2020, Pt. 2

Merry Christmas everyone and welcome to the final service of 2020 for SWFF. I don't know that I've ever looked so forward to a year being over! What a mess. But good year or bad year, I'm so thankful that *every* year ends with Christmas. Because Christmas – the theology of Christmas – reminds us that hope has come into our story. That no matter how dark our circumstances...a light has shined.

That's the real meaning of Christmas, but you know what? You can't miss that in the "fake" meaning of Christmas either! I for one don't go in for the whole "war on Christmas" nonsense. I'm not sure it's a very attractive witness to berate non-believers into saying "Merry Christmas". But even in the consumer version of Christmas, I still think the true meaning is always *shining* through.

Anika is home from college this week and so the other night we were all together as a family working on a jigsaw puzzle and we put on our favorite Christmas movie in the background. No one would accuse this of being a theologically sound Christmas film, but I want to show you a quick clip that illustrates my point about "shining through". [**Xmas Vacation :56**].

Christmas and light just goes together. Everyone knows this. It really is one of the consistent ways that Christmas has been celebrated throughout history - lighting candles, lights on trees and on houses. What is that all about? It's the key theme of the Christmas story as told by the Gospel of John. We started to look at it last week – at Jesus as the Word – and we said that while there may not be mangers and shepherds and angels, make no mistake, the first chapter of John is most definitely a Christmas story. Probably the richest theology of Christmas in the Bible.

So I'm going to read you the first eleven verses of the chapter this morning and I'd like for you to keep a lookout for the word "light" – see how many times you can count it in the text. Ready? **John 1:1–11**, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the **light** of all mankind. The **light** shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that **light**, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the **light**; he came only as a witness to the **light**. The true **light** that gives **light** to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."*

What did you get? I counted seven times. Seven times, the word 'light', and though there'll be other themes in here, I think we need to ask ourselves, what is this telling us about light? So let's just take a look at how simply these first eleven verses of the gospel of John, tell us that we *need* light. Human beings need a light, that there *is* a light, and then *how* we can connect to it, how we can receive it. And then we're going to act out the coming of the light with our candles. But first; We need light, there is a light and how we can receive it.

Now, **first of all, the need for light.** All of these mentions of light, but notice down in v. 9 you get the "true" light and in v. 4 is "the light of mankind", which means there's a kind of light that we all need. But we're also told in these verses that our relationship with that true light is, rather tenuous. Because obviously, as we're going to get in a minute down to verse 9 and 10, it talks about when the true light came into the world, it was rejected.

But here in verse 5 it says, that, in a sense, the true light came *into* the dark world, and it says, "the darkness has not overcome it." The old King James Version says (**John 1:5**), "*And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness **comprehended** it not.*" Some other translations say the word here is "understood it". Well, those are pretty different meanings. It tricky because it's a single Greek word, but it's a word with, you might say, planned ambiguity in it.

It's really like our English word "master". Now, think about what it means to master something. Sometimes to master something means to extinguish it, to fight with it and overcome it. So, you "master your fears", means you're trying to get rid of them, okay? But if you "master a subject", you're trying to understand it. To say "I mastered that subject" means "I got it, I understood it." So which is it?

Well, this word means *both* of those things. And it probably is *deliberately* ambiguous which means John is trying to say that there's a true light that human beings need, but we not only are hostile to it, we're clueless about it. We're not only hostile to it, we're clueless about it – we don't get it. And so what it's actually saying is the world is a dark place, and we do not know how to enlighten ourselves.

Now, let's go a little further with this idea of light. When the Bible talks about light and darkness, what is that symbolizing? Well, it's really not that hard, it's what you think it means. First of all, darkness means evil and suffering. We talk about the dark times in our lives, or we're in a dark place in our lives. By the way, maybe this year in our society especially, let me clarify that we're not talking about racial stereotypes here. I have read ignorant racists to say, "See, dark is bad, light is good." That's a Satanic twisting of what we're talking about. Look, I drive a black car because it makes me look cool – black *is* beautiful. But I also drive that cool black car with my lights on at night because I don't want to *die*.

So let's not be dumb, but dark *is* linked with evil and suffering. And evil and suffering can have many, many, many forms. You know, when Jesus was born, if you go to the book of Matthew, it tells us that King Herod found out that there was a someone born who was supposed to be the prophesied future King, Herod decided to kill all the children in the village of Bethlehem to make sure there was no future competition. Mary and Joseph got away but had to go to Egypt, and so you have refugees and you've got violence and you've got injustice and you've got war and grief and sorrow and broken families and bereavement, and you know, just like now. The world's a dark place as the world continues to have all those things.

So when we talk about darkness, it can mean the world is filled with evil and suffering, but darkness can also mean ignorance. It means you can't see reality. The other night, I walked into our bathroom and it was dark – you know how early it's getting dark now – and it caught me off guard, but I just needed to get to the closet. And for some reason I decided not to turn on the light because “surely, the ottoman that Deanna keeps to get ready on would be up against the vanity and not in the middle of the room between me and said closet”. And of course, that was *not* the case and my toe suffered a great evil because of my ignorance in the darkness!

And so again, what it means to say the world is a dark place, is to say; The world is filled with evil and suffering and we don't have the ability or the knowledge to know how to solve it. And that means that any solution – any light in our darkness - has to come from *outside* the human race. It's appropriate that the clip we just played featured the Hallelujah Chorus from Handal's Messiah – hey maybe it's a good theology movie after all!

But in that famous piece of music, there's a verse that Matthew 4:15 quotes from **Isaiah 9:2** that says “*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*” And that's Matthew's way of talking about Jesus came into the world, means that we're *in* darkness and light has come into the world from *outside* the human race. Now, I'm going to tell you, everything in our culture is conditioning us to not believe that. *Everything* in our culture is against that! And maybe especially at Christmas. Commercialized Christmas actually reverses the message.

Six years ago, a supermarket chain in the UK released a Christmas commercial that was enormously popular – and by rights, it *is* excellent. It was set at the front lines during World War I. It's three minutes long, but let me show the the highlights. [**Sainsbury 1:26**].

Now, that's sweet, but what's the subtle message? If we could just get people together – and buy each other chocolate – we could end war! It's the old standby beauty pageant answer, if we all pull together, we can do it, we can create a world of unity and peace, which is probably the exact opposite of the message of Christmas.

Because see, the message of Christmas is not *from* them, a light has dawned, it's *upon* them a light has dawned - a light that comes from outside of us. We can't possibly generate that kind of light. That's what the United Nations has attempted to do for 75 years now – and while I am sympathetic to the effort, it hasn't worked. We do not know how to solve our own problems, our evil and stuff, we just can't.

It's the opposite of the true message of Christmas and the culture is going to be constantly trying to re-engineer it into something more humanistic, but it won't work. So this world is a dark place, that's point one, *but*, **point two**, the other thing we're told here is that **there is a light**. Yes, it's outside the human race, but there is a light, the light we need does exist.

Well, where is it? Well, let's look at verses 1, but we have to remember something from last week. If you were here or tuned in, we saw that John tells us that “the Word” - the *logos* – that comes into the world

was Jesus. And so it is appropriate to re-read John 1:1 this way, “In the beginning was Jesus and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God.” Now, that might be familiar to you. You've heard it before. But let me show you how absolutely startling it is when the two truths that are being given to you in this sense are put next to each other.

First of all, it tells us Jesus is God. It doesn't say Jesus is *a* God. There's no article. In the Greek, you know, in the original Greek there is no article. It doesn't say Jesus Christ was *a* god. It says Jesus Christ *was* God. If it said Jesus was *a* God, then there'd be more than one God. Right? The Bible is not saying that. It's saying that you know God? - the one God? - Jesus is that one God.

But then right next to it, it says, Jesus is God and Jesus is with God. Now the word “with” means to have a relationship. In **Mark 3:14** it talks about when Jesus chose his disciples, “*He appointed twelve that they might be **with** him and that he might send them out to preach...*” And to be *with* means to live with him, to be in a relationship of the closest communication and love. So to be “with” someone, that's a term that in the Bible means to be in a relationship with them.

So here's what it's saying. There's only one God and Jesus is God, and yet Jesus is in a love relationship with God - Jesus is God and Jesus is in a love relationship with God. And even though the Holy Spirit's not mentioned here, he is elsewhere in the Bible, and so here's what we got. There's only one God, not three Gods, there's only one God. *But*, within that one God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, know and love each other. And have done so endlessly for all eternity – from *before* the beginning.

This is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and it is unique to our faith. Only Christianity then, says that at the very heart of God, is a dynamic love relationship. From all eternity, in the very *being* of God, there have been three persons who have known each other, and loved each other, and glorified each other, and adored each other. And they have been loving and communicating with each other from all eternity. Inside God, there is an exploding, dynamic, infinitely powerful set of relationships.

And therefore, the meaning of life is relationship in love. See if there was one God, who only had one personality, one person, and then that person, that God created other beings, then love comes in later, right? There's power and *then* there's love. Isn't that right? I mean you can't have love until you have objects of love, other beings, right, other persons. So first God is powerful, and then later on God is loving.

But if you have a Triune God, if you have a God who is the Father, Son, Holy Spirit from all eternity, then love is *first*. Love is the most important thing. And relationships are the most important thing and communication is the most important thing. But let me go a little further here, because I think that the Bible really wants to just astonish us with this. Because when the Bible says “God is love”, you and I probably tend to think okay, that means God is somehow loving. No, no, no. God is much more, *literally* that. God from all eternity, before He created the world, before He did anything else was already love, and dynamic love; interpersonal love, intimate friendship.

And in verse 18, we read this one last week as well, it says something rather startling, that only comes across, I think, in the King James, because they leave the word as it appears in the Greek. **(John 1:18 KJV)** “*No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is **in the bosom of the Father...***”. In the bosom of the Father? I think that John, by using that language, is deliberately trying to get you to use your imagination for a minute.

Think about it, how many people are there in the world right now, that if you were lying on a sofa, you know, without even asking permission, could walk right over to you and lay down right alongside of you, and that would be fine? How many people are there like that? Not many, right? And the ones that can do that are in the most intimate relationship possible, right?

So I think this is what we're being told. If you want to understand who God is and what God is like, then you have to start to imagine the time in your life when you felt the *most* loved...now multiply that by a trillion trillion trillion! Imagine the time in your life when you felt the most understood, the most appreciated, the most adored, the most secure, the most significant. And you remember the joy of that, okay?

And it's impossible almost to hold on to that because you know, we're selfish beings. And so even if you're in a *good* marriage, those kinds of times come and go. Even if you're in one of the best marriages, those times, they come and go, because we tend to be selfish and we tend to want to not *give* to each other but we want to *take*, you know, and we fight. And therefore those times in which we have been the most blissful, the most loved, the most joyful, the most adored; those times, they're fleeting, right and they're partial, right?

Now, imagine three persons who are *perfect* persons, who *always* cherish and glorify the people they love, who *never* are saying "you got to serve me", but they're always serving each other, and they're giving themselves to each other exhaustively and completely from all eternity.

So you have to take the few moments in your life that you've experienced some of that, multiply by a trillion trillion trillion, and that is God! God is infinitely happy. God is infinitely loving. God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit are just pouring joy and love and glory into each other's souls, endlessly. They're bathed in the joy of each other, they're bathed in the love of each other, they are therefore infinitely happy, infinitely joyful, infinitely loving. And, you know, why would God have created other beings to share in it? Why would God create beings that are in God's image? So that we can do it with each other, and with God, just sharing all that. Love God, love one another.

Now you say what does all that got to do with the theme? Everything! Because here's what I'm trying to show you, this same author, John, wrote three letters as well as the gospel account. And so **1 John 1:5** says, "*This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that **God is light**, and in him is no darkness at all.*" What does that mean, "God is light"? That's kind of abstract? What is the light? Do some algebra: If $X=Y$ and $X=Z$ then $Y=Z$ right? (I was told there would be no math.) If God is light and God is love, then what is the light? The light is love!

And when the light came into the world, the love came into the world. This is what we need. Why? Because let's look at our darkness. Every single bit of evil and suffering in this world - the darkness of this world - what is it at the core? It's always a lack of love, it's a loss of love. What is war? What is racism? What is injustice. What is crime? What is violence? What is divorce? What is a broken family? What is bereavement? What is grief? What is sorrow? What is it? It's always the loss of love. It's always the lack of love. Always! That's our darkness.

And why can't we generate our own light? Because we're selfish. Because there's something about our heart that says "me first". You know, here's the great irony about the human nature. We want love. We want love more than anything else. That's what makes our life meaningful, all the sappy songs are right, and we *know* it.

And yet at the same time, we've got something in us that says "me first". You serve "me" - but that's the *end* of love. Love is "you" first, I will serve you. And God's got that. God's got that infinitely. And because God, is therefore infinitely unselfish and loving, God is infinitely happy. And we don't have that, and so we're in darkness and we need that light.

Okay, **thirdly, lastly, then how do we get it?** How does it happen? Now, obviously, this is the beginning of the book of John, the beginning of the Jesus narrative. The rest of the book of John is all about that, and so we have to kind of look ahead, but there's a hint even in here, and it's down here at the end. This is **v.9-11**, "*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*"

I know this is the Christmas story, but this part is pointing us to Easter. That is that Jesus Christ came into the world to be rejected. He knew he would be rejected. But the ultimate rejection was that it says his own did not receive him, more than that, his own *killed* him. He came to *us*; he created us, if you make something, it's yours. He made us. He owned us. And when he came to us - to be our light in the darkness - he was rejected. He was put to death.

Why? Well, because this is the darkness in our hearts. We want love and yet at the same time we're afraid of anybody coming in and saying, "you have to serve me". And my heart says, "No, no, I don't want to serve anybody, I want to be in charge." And so what Jesus Christ had to do was overcome the barrier between ourselves and God. We talked last week about what the Bible says is a barrier between us and God.

And what did Jesus do about it? He went to the cross, and on the cross, two things happened. Darkness came down. **Matthew 27:45** says the crucifixion happened in the middle of the day, “*From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land.*” Unless you’re in Alaska in winter, that’s not supposed to happen! In the middle of the day, it became completely dark; darkness came down. Why? The light of the world descended into darkness.

But that was only symbolic. At the same time he cried out, one verse later (**v.46**), “*About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).*” Do you see? We’ve been making a connection here between light and love, darkness and selfishness. And so let’s just connect the dots. What was happening to Jesus on the cross? Outwardly darkness came down, inwardly darkness was coming down, what was it? It was the loss of love.

We say Jesus Christ went to the cross to take the penalty our sins deserved. Well, what is the penalty for selfishness? See selfishness is its own punishment. Selfishness is the loss of love.

You know, if you’re in a marriage, and both of you are being selfish, nobody has to come along and fine you - It’s not like, “Ugh, I’ve got to go to love court, I got another selfish ticket.” Some of you spouses are like, “Do you like go to the internet and print these? Where do you get these selfish tickets?”

No, you know the penalty for selfishness - you’re losing love. You’re losing intimacy. You’re pulling away from each other. It’s awful. I mean, it’s true in friendships, it’s true in families, it’s true *everywhere*. So what is the punishment that selfishness deserves? It’s the punishment that selfishness always *gets...the loss of love.*

Do you understand what Jesus was experiencing? But oh my goodness, the magnitude! Do you understand why Jesus’s agony was able to atone for the sins of the whole world, why he could take the punishment for *everybody*? It goes to magnitude. See, the psychologists will tell you - but you don’t need them to tell you because you know this intuitively anyway - there is no greater mental health pain - psychological anguish and trauma - than the loss of a spouse through death or divorce. Number two is death of a child. But spouse trumps even that because God created the husband-wife bond to supersede the parent-child bond.

So the greatest mental pain is tied to the greatest loss of love. The more intimate the relationship, the more awful it's loss. But don't forget, even if you've had a great run – Deanna's grandparents were married for 74 years! - but even if you had a great marriage, two human beings can only love each other so much. But the Father and the Son have loved each other from all eternity and *perfectly*.

Can you imagine? If you know how agonizing it is to lose love right now in our finite kind of limited way, *what* must it have been like to lose an infinite love? Think of the agony, think of the hell, that Jesus experienced on the cross. The agony and pain he experienced on the cross - that loss of love - was greater than anything you and I have ever experienced, as a nuclear warhead is greater than the snap of a rubber band.

And he died for our sins. And the reason why *that* is the key to connect into the light is this, number one, objectively, our sins are forgiven. So when I say Father forgive me, because of what Jesus did, God can forgive my sins and now come into my life and begin to start to fill me with His love. So that I begin to be somebody who actually *can* start to love other people selflessly, and you can become someone who can love other people.

It's a matter of economics. Listen, it's very, very, very hard to be really generous to people when you can't pay your own light bill. Okay? But if you have a lot of money, then it's easy to be generous - a lot of people still *aren't* generous with it, but it's at least possible. And the same thing is true with love. It's very hard to love other people and not be selfish when your own vision is so needy, when you don't feel very lovable yourself. But when God's love starts to pour in through the cross - when you see that Jesus Christ lost, infinite love out of love for *you* - that begins to melt your heart.

And that begins to fill you up. And you become rich in love, so you start to be able to give other people love without always doing in that kind of selfish way, or manipulative way. That's what it means for the light to come into the world and to chase away our darkness. At Christmas, a light has come into our darkness. Not everyone accepts the light. Some can't comprehend it. How about you?

The band is going to come and we're going to turn off all the lights. During the first song, it's going to be as dark in here as we are capable of making it. And then we're going to begin to sing. Now, we're all going to have to put on our masks to do this – it's ok, it will just serve as an additional reminder of the suffering of 2020! But we have to do it because we're going to be invading our social distancing a bit. Because at a point I'm going to light a candle. And then I'm going to pass it to someone, and they'll pass it to someone and before long, into this auditorium a light will shine.

And as we do, listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say to you. For some of you, He may whisper that this is the last year you have to spend in the dark – the true dark – if you will just open up your heart and receive the light. Receive the love of God that can flood into your life through Jesus Christ His son.

[Candlelight singing]