

<Readings from Isaiah, Luke 1 and 2, and John 1>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

*"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

I've always loved that line in the opening verses of John's gospel, especially at this time of year, especially now on this night. It conjures all kinds of images and memories: the memory of campers holding candles, circling the pond at Duffield while singing vespers on the closing night; the image of my grandmother, in the last years of her life, sitting quietly in a pew near the front of the sanctuary on Christmas Eve in Olean, huddled over her candle as if its light was sustaining her; the memory of a summer field lit by hundreds of fireflies alternately winking in and out of luminescence. And each year, as I gather here with you on this night, these memories and images flood and fill my own spirit, and then increase when we, together in a few minutes, light our own candles and once again let our own light shine in the darkness.

*"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

The prologue of John's gospel is some of the most poetic imagery in the New Testament, framing the arrival of Christ into the world in cosmic and fundamental dynamics. Matthew and Luke both tell the story from the cultural and historical contexts, telling us of the experiences of the various characters in the story and helping us to remember what happened, and how people responded. We hear the proclamation of Gabriel and the response of Mary. We relive the uncertainty and dedication of Joseph. We hear the joyous acclaim of the angels and witness the wonder of the shepherds. And perhaps we remember, as well, our own time playing such roles in pageants, or now our children doing the same. But John wants us to recall that the birth of Jesus, God among us as Immanuel, has greater meaning than just what we are aware of in our own perspectives. This is an event which impacts the fullness of creation.

*"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

J.R.R. Tolkien, well-known author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, was himself a devout and practicing Catholic. Having served as a soldier in World War I he had first-hand experience of the rigors and horrors of warfare. Having grown up in the church, he knew first-hand the hope and promise that comes through faith, and the stories we hold which have been handed down through generations. And while Tolkien is best known for his fantasy writings, he also wrote poetically about the Christmas event, beginning with the great need of the world and framing the story in a similar cosmic dynamic of diminished reality and living.

"Grim was the world, and grey last night: The moon and stars were fled, the hall was dark without song or light, the fires were fallen dead. The wind in the trees was like to the sea, and over the mountains' teeth it whistled bitter-cold and free..."

Tolkien, as mentioned, certainly knew the experience and perspective of darkness in the world, though not merely darkness as the absence of light, as if the wall switch were simply in the "off" position, waiting for some divine power to come along and flip it to "on." Tolkien knew of the soul-draining weariness of the lack of love, and the listlessness of spirits casting about aimlessly for direction and purpose.

And while we typically don't want to acknowledge such realities ourselves, especially in the warmth of such a place as this on such a night as this, it is no stretch of our imaginations and memories to realize this desire for hope, to yearn for the vision which lifts our spirits and stirs our hearts to joyous song. All too readily we, too, know the presence of darkness in our world, in our lives, and the awareness of such is enough to lay us low and sap all our energy.

There are many miracles which take place on this night, and we are called to bear witness to all of them.

We claim first the most readily apparent one, that on a dark night in a backwoods and wayward place, God chose to enter into the depths of creation, the fullness of humanity, as a newborn babe - vulnerable, hungry, dependent, fragile. From this movement, the Divine would know every aspect, every facet, every momental and minuscule movement of our living, our breathing, our existing and relating. On such a night, God enacted the miracle of choosing to know us, fully, in our own living by coming to be one of us, and incomprehensibly the fullness of the Divine Presence and Power was contained within the most unlikely of human vessels. Immanuel, God-among-Us, once and for all times, forever. But this is only the first of the miracles we recognize and celebrate. Another can be found in returning to the poetry of John's gospel.

*"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

That word, "light," in the original Greek carries multiple meanings. When it becomes translated to English, we often have to choose just one of those meanings, because that's the way English works; a word has to mean one thing in order to make sense. But in Greek, a word can have multiple related meanings, and can represent all of them at the same time. And the word for light, "*phos*" - from which we get 'phosphorescence' - is one such word. It means 'light' in the way we primarily think of it, such as the light around us and the light of our candles and the light of day, driving away the darkness of the night. But it also means "awareness" and "understanding" and "illumination" - both of the eyes but also of the mind and the spirit.

And so another miracle is celebrated this night, as light again comes into our world: our understanding expands and our awareness recognizes that the darkness of our world,

the darkness of our lives, is no longer the defining or determining reality. In the light of Christ come into the world, our own understanding of the world increases, and our awareness of who we are, and *whose* we are, deepens exponentially. In the light of Christ, illuminating and making visible to not just our eyes but our spirits, as well, we become more fully aware of the intimacy of God among us, aware of love beyond all measure, the source of our own love, breaking forth into a world struggling under the weight of despair and hopelessness. To us, to our world has come light, and in this light, hope, and with it, our understanding of it, which darkness itself has not understood or overcome.

J.R.R. Tolkien, beginning his Christmas poem with, “grim was the world, and grey last night,” goes on to describe the coming of God’s Light, Christ’s birth, the world’s joy reflected in Mary’s delighted laugh. And then he closes the poem by heralding, “Glad is the world and fair this night with stars about its head, and the hall is filled with laughter and light, and fires are burning red. The bells of Paradise now ring with bells of Christendom, and ‘Gloria, Gloria’ we will sing that God on earth is come” (Noel).

Similarly, Ann Weems reflects, “When the Holy Child is born into our hearts / there is a rain of stars / a rushing of angels / a blaze of candles / this God burst into our lives. / Love is running through the streets” (Godburst).

In the midst of darkness attempting to break into our hearts, our lives, our world, we are not only promised but given the miracle of God come into the world, fully present among and within us, and in this miracle we are enabled to realize every other miracle sprouting forth around us. We are reminded that the Light of God’s love and presence shines in the darkness not just once, but in all times and places, and we have eyes to see and hands to uplift. On this night, once again, gathered not only in the light of the candles we light but gathered in the light of our spirits alongside one another, we proclaim again with joy the miracle of that night long ago, and with hope and promise we rejoice, again and still. Rejoice, O weary world, indeed, for yonder breaks our new and glorious song of hope and life. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*