

The Light in the Night

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Christmas Eve 2017

John 1:1-5

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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.

This is the Word of the Lord...

The Scriptures are the story of an oppressed people seeking justice and the God that delivers them. Like the aging and childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, being visited by angels who promise they will be the parents of generations - the story of God is about *God with us*.

367 days ago, my family did something that will alter traditions and values for generations to come... we bought an artificial Christmas tree.

It was a hard decision... one year in the making and yet in the end – if everyone has an allergy to pine – including the dog - it's probably time to try a different option to fulfill one's Christmas tree needs.

As we set up the tree this year, putting the four pieces together, and plugging in the working lights all in less than ten minutes, I couldn't help but flashback to the 1970's version of the same exercise.

Our family kept the tree outside in a bucket of water until we had time to put the tree up, and so almost always at that appointed time the water was frozen, creating a bulb of ice at the bottom of it. We had a metal tree stand that was always a bit warped and required a masters degree in engineering to get all of the metal pieces aimed in the direction that would both keep the stand level and hold up the tree.

My father would wrestle the thing in and Mom would consult on the angle of the tree – while my sister and I “helped”. At age 8 my abilities to turn the screws at the trunk of the tree were seriously lacking.

And then came the lights...

There is a generational divide between those who live their lives unscarred from Christmas tree decorating day... and those who remember when if just one bulb went out – the whole string of lights went out. In those days, Christmas tree decoration day was also learn some fun new words from Daddy day.

The one year I remember, I think my sister was 3 or 4 and my father was working on a string of lights and couldn't figure out why they would go on and off seemingly without any regard to where he was checking the bulbs. The lights would be on... and he thought he had it fixed – then they'd go off.

He'd start fiddling with the string again and the lights would go on... turn to put them on the tree – off again – back to checking the bulbs – on – turn to the tree - off.

Eventually my father exclaimed something truly poetic like, “Where’s the bleeping bulb!” and with that my sister from around the other side of the tree said, “Here it is Daddy” as she calmly played with the bulb... putting it in... taking it out... lights on... lights off...

Sometimes I feel like negotiating around in this world is a little bit like trying to get those old tree lights to work – we see glimpses of light here and there – but just when we see it, it goes off again... we struggle to hold our hope... and then we see a glimpse of light again... but not nearly enough to get our bearings or feel like the world is working as it should.

If only it were as simple as, “Where is the light?”

“Here it is!”

The Scriptures are the story of an oppressed people seeking justice and the God that delivers them. Like Moses being equipped to lead the people out of Egypt - the story of God is about *God with us*.

The culture has taken over this holiday. And I guess in some ways that’s appropriate. The winter festival came first, and later the church appropriated the timing as the birth of Christ. In reality, it’s not like anyone really noticed when a couple of poor people travelled, couldn’t afford a place to stay, and had a baby out back. The stories are fun – shepherds and angels and wise ones. But except for a select few, in that moment, the arrival of Jesus didn’t make much difference in the world. There’s nothing particularly radical about a baby.

But that's the point.

God with us broke into our world in the most vulnerable of ways; helpless, without any power, without any human station or title. We have gathered here tonight to celebrate that out of God's great love for us, God decided to give up all of the things that God could have – all of God's power, all of God's grandeur, all of God's celestial distance – so that we could know – not just with our minds, but with our hearts – that God is with us at all times.

God became flesh so that we would know, with our very being, that when life gets tough and messy and overwhelming... *God is with us.*

God knew that you and I would need a Savior who has lived our life, in all of its glory, in all of its ordinariness, in all of its pain.

God knew that you and I would need a Savior who has gotten down in the dirt with us, into the messiness and complexity of life, with us.

God knew that you and I would need a Savior for whom flesh and blood, suffering and joy, life and death were good enough to take on first hand.

And God knew that you and I need a Savior who has also died our death, thereby destroying its power of separation, destroying its impotent threat of nothingness forever.

God knew that you and I, this world, needed a Savior like Jesus.

Where is the light?

Here it is – *God with us.*

That's the Good News... here's the challenge: we must be like Jesus. The world needs us to be like Jesus. The world needs the light.

An old story speaks of a blind man who went to visit his friend in the next village. It was night when he could return. His friend gave the blind man a lighted lamp as he said goodbye to him. Refusing to receive the lamp, the blind man said, "I don't need this lamp, I will use my stick to find my way. Nights and days are all the same to me."

His friend said, "Keep it with you. It is not for you, but for others. If you carry this lighted lamp with you, others can see it. Then they will not collide with you."

The blind man started out on his journey carrying the lighted lamp with him. On the way, there was a storm. He waited under a tree and resumed his journey after the storm had gone through. Suddenly a stranger coming in the opposite direction collided with him and both fell down to the ground. The blind man shouted, "Couldn't you see the lighted lamp in my hand? Are you blind?"

The stranger replied, "I am not blind but your lamp was not burning."

"I'm sorry," said the blind man, "I am blind and did not know that the flame had gone out."

We are all beloved children of God. But the divine light shining in us gets extinguished by greed, and prejudice, and apathy – causing us to lose our way, and making it hard for a world to see.

I said earlier that there is nothing radical about a baby. But there is something extremely radical about Jesus and what he stood for and what he died for – love.

The Scriptures are the story of an oppressed people seeking justice and the God that delivers them. Like the prophets being called to speak hard truths to an arrogant nation - the story of God is about *God with us*.

God with us

for the poor and the political refugees

for all the vulnerable who have doors shut in their faces

God with us

for the strangers and the outsiders

for the laborers who scrape together a living on the margins

God with us

for rulers who tried to thwart it

and officials who will later seek to extinguish it

God with us

for families who don't quite fit the mold
and for the faithful who don't always know what they're getting into
with God

God with us

we can't hold it back
the angels will sing
the light will shine
heaven and earth will touch...

And we, well, we won't be the same—
and thus the world won't be either.

Where is the light?

It. is. Here.

Thanks be to God – Amen.