

WPC Joint service w/Korean Glory PC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
December 26, 2010

Illumination
John 1:1-5

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." In December of 1998 I was overcome with darkness. In Thanksgiving of that year, we discovered my father had inoperable stomach cancer. That Christmas was the last one we spent with him. It was the most difficult and the darkest time of my entire life. His body was wracked with pain, and he was tired of fighting. Through sheer force of will, my father made it to his 64th birthday on January 8, and eight days later, he died. I loved my father very much, and I desperately miss him, especially at this time of year.

I share this story with you not because I have a special need to be sad at this time, but because at Christmastime events like this remind me of the stark contrasts that frame this season. At the same time that we celebrate the beauty and wonder of this season, we carry with us the deaths of loved ones, and often we experience deep grief. At the same time that we shower one another with presents, we're keenly aware of the millions of people who are living in deep poverty. At the same time that we toast each other's good health, we're aware of those whose health is not good, those who face the burden of debilitating illness and disease. "At the same time that we profess

to be following the light of a star hovering over Bethlehem, we are moving step by step into the darkest days of the year. As the carol goes, we have entered the bleak mid-winter.”¹

It’s been said that the first chapter of John's Gospel has inspired more theological writing than any other chapter of the Bible. That doesn't surprise me. John's Gospel begins with majestic words that make us think about who God is and what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ. These words echo the creation story in Genesis, "In the beginning...."

This morning, I want to make a reflection on v. 5 of today’s text: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." I used these words at our Christmas Eve service. I have always loved these words; I’ve always loved the imagery of light piercing through the darkness, and the darkness not being able to overcome it.

But as I reflected on this verse this past week, I was struck as much for what it does not say as much as what it does say. Notice, it doesn’t declare that when the light comes into the world it obliterates the darkness. Isn’t that what we all want? We want God to take every moment of grief, every despair, every horrendous tragedy, every evil, every disease, and

¹ Scott Black Johnston, Day1, Dec. 24, 2006.

absolutely wipe it all out. We want the light to arrive and not simply overcome the darkness, but to overwhelm and crush it.

But instead of total victory, we get something much more modest in John's Gospel. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not extinguish it. The light still provided illumination which the darkness was unable to put out. Or, if you prefer the King James translation, "the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." That's it?! The light came. The darkness was unable to understand or extinguish it, but it was able to continue its devastating work in our fallen world. Why is that good news?

Now, while I may not like this perspective on the light, it strikes me as being true. In the 2,000 years since that first Christmas night in Bethlehem, can anyone argue that the darkness has diminished? Is there any less pain, any less cruelty, any less suffering? If anything, there seems to be more, not less, of the bad stuff - more suffering, more nastiness, more agony. There are so many days when you hear the news and think that the darkness has won.

I remember when I was young my family went on vacation. On our way somewhere, we saw a sign for a tour through a cave. Never having done anything like that before, we decided to go on this tour. It was

fascinating – we saw a river and stalactites and maybe even a few bats (though that may have been my 10 year old imagination). At one point in the tour, the guide took us to a part of the cave that was deep inside the earth, and then she turned off her light. A few people gasped. It was completely dark – so dark that you could not tell the difference whether you closed your eyes or not. It was so dark that when the guide told us to try holding out our fingers in front of our face, we couldn't see them at all. Of course, she then turned on the light at that point, meaning all of us looked pretty silly with our fingers in front of our faces.

But when she turned her small lamp on, the difference the light made was phenomenal. By no means did that light fill the vast cave, but all the same it changed things. The illumination from the lamp made it possible for people to see themselves and each other. And I realized that for those in deep darkness, a little light can make all the difference in the world.

"The light shines in the darkness," writes John. Maybe that's the point. As Scott Black Johnston says, "It's not that the light obliterates the darkness; it's simply that the light is there. This is the message of the incarnation. God enters into the darkness to sit alongside of us. God refuses to dwell in the heavens above and from a safe distance watch the drama of human life play out. Instead, God climbs right into the darkest places to be

with us; and in that holy and luminous action, we find reason enough to hope.”²

Johnston tells a story of a young man in his congregation named Bobby who he visits once a month. Bobby now lives with his parents.

Several years ago, Bobby was diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. From early on this disease, which progresses differently in different people, has affected Bobby's ability to talk. On this particular visit, Bobby was using a speech machine - a device that enables him to select words that it can then reproduce with its electronic "voice." Sitting together in Bobby's living room, they talked about the Christmas season. Bobby showed him pictures of his two children visiting Santa and explained that it was the first time that his young child did not cry. They talked about how much he loves ice cream. "All flavors," Bobby said. He also described how much weight he had lost in the past ten months.

At one point, Bobby's mother, who was sitting with them throughout their conversation, had to get up and leave the room to answer the phone. As she was leaving, Johnston chose that opportune moment to say to Bobby, "I can only imagine how hard this is for you." He nodded and began to tear up. By the time his mom returned, they were both bawling. Then he asked

² Johnston, Day1.

Bobby, "What gives you comfort?" Immediately he began to type. And within seconds the electronic voice pronounced a single, monotone word, "company."

On hearing this, his mother chimed in. Oh, yes, Bobby loves visitors and the food that they bring. She began to tell stories about all of the people from church who had dropped off meals and those who had stopped by to talk with Bobby. She spoke of the electric wheelchair that he was using and the generosity of the Shepherd Spinal Center in Atlanta. Throughout it all Bobby kept smiling and nodding.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John's Gospel is clear. The darkness is not an illusion. It is there. It is real. We are always and ever in a battle with it. But we are not alone. The blessing of God almighty is solidarity. It is presence. It is the light coming to be with us. It is, as Bobby put it so quickly, "company." (Scott Black Johnston, Day1, Dec. 24, 2006)

On this day after Christmas, may you be blessed this day and every day of your lives with the light of God. May you take comfort in knowing that, whatever darkness surrounds you, God is with you, bringing a light that the darkness cannot ever overcome. Amen.