

Advent Vespers – December 14, 2011
The National Presbyterian Church

Here Comes the Light

John 1:1-9; John 8:12

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In our Advent Vespers, we are thinking together about the coming of Jesus. Advent means coming. We're doing so with the help of the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, which does not tell us the story of Jesus' birth, but does describe in different ways, the coming of Jesus into this world.

- Our series began a few weeks ago with Patrick Wilson reminding us that Jesus' coming was proclaimed when he was an adult, at least, by John the Baptist, the messenger who came before him to prepare the way for his coming to ancient Israel.
- As I picked up the series last week, we began focusing on three words that appear in John's Gospel, that describe Jesus' life and ministry amongst us.
 - One of them is 'life' and we will look at that next week.
 - Last week, we thought together about Jesus coming to us as the Word of God; a sense that the whole universe is filled with God's word; that God is speaking all the time, his word is powerful and it is creative. And he longs for us to hear that word that will give us life.

Today, we want to focus on another image that we have in the pages of John's Gospel, and that is the image of light - the image of light. Here comes, in Jesus Christ . . . here comes . . . into the world . . . here comes the light!

Now, I don't know what you think of when you think about light, what images come to your mind.

- I think about the rising of the sun at the beginning of the day. I think, especially in winter, of a nice beach, looking over the Atlantic

Ocean and the sun rising, and the morning light and the warmth creeping across the ocean and across the sand, and the beauty of the day just beginning.

- Or I think about the dawn coming, not on a beach in an open place, but in a city. One of my favorite memories is of the morning when I first came to this country. I had taken a train the night before, down from the city of Edinburgh to London. The train arrived at five in the morning and the plane didn't leave 'til later in the day, and I had a few hours to pass. And I wandered through the city; wandered through London as the day began, as the dawn began, as the sun rose through the buildings, just watching the city come to life, from peace and quiet to the noises of cars honking left, right and center, and the hustle and the bustle of the day - but all coming with the sun rising.

Sometimes when we think about the sun, just as with the beach, you think about it differently at different times of the year.

- The beach may provide a wonderful image of light coming to us. But then we also think, don't we, of times when the sun is shining so brightly in the summertime that it's not a positive feeling at all: in fact it's unbearable. The light is reflecting off the buildings and it's reflecting off the concrete, and sometimes off the sand!) and we want to go someplace where there's a shadow, just to get away from the searing blaze and gaze and daze of the sunlight.
- Or back to the winter and the brighter side of winter - think of blue sky days; we've had a few of those, with the sun giving some warmth, but especially light in the crystal clear blue sky.
- And then going further north, thinking of snow and white and pine trees, the green and the white and the blue, and the light lighting all of those things up.
- We might think in terms of places, and seasons, or we might think these days, in our modern era, of light being truly focused and coming to us in a laser beam, a sharp point of light which people really didn't think about until our day and age, the whole idea that light can cut through steel or can perform surgery without blood being everywhere. What power there is within this light.
- Or we might think of this space, here in the sanctuary, all around us, lit up on a dark night, lit up with candles. But even this is just a

small reflection of what we will see next week when we truly have candles in our hand and that glittering glow of a Christmas Eve service, reminding us, perhaps, of many Christmases in days gone by with different people who have been a part of our life, and that Christmas light somehow reminds us of them.

Some of you may be familiar with a carol written by John Rutter. Somebody was asking earlier whether I was going to sing this evening. I'm not going to. I will comfort you - I'm not going to sing. But these are gorgeous words for the choir to sing sometime, which go like this. And they may be familiar to you.

How do you capture the wind on the water? How do you count all the stars in the sky?

How can you measure the love of a mother, or how can you write down a baby's first cry?

Candlelight; angel light; firelight and star glow, shine on his cradle 'til breaking of dawn.

Gloria. Gloria in excelsis deo. Angels are singing, the Christ child is born.

Rutter sees the light there, as we do on a Christmas Eve, with the candles glowing all around about us, as a gentle, warm and holy light.

Though of course, when we do think of the story of Jesus' birth as a whole and the angels' light, which shone upon the shepherds, when 'glory shone all about' them, there was, in fact, nothing gentle about that. If you remember the King James' version, at least, the shepherds were (remember the expression?), 'sore afraid'. The light was intense, and there was a sense of fear and awe and wonder that came with it.

I don't necessarily think that there was the same intensity in the star that the Wise Men saw. But there was certainly a sense that in the star's light there was a commanding presence, so that the Magi felt compelled to follow it to the manger.

One of the things I think we tend to forget in our modern world, with all the city lights around about us, is what night time would be like to the people of the ancient world, looking up at all the stars in the heaven. Those of you who grew up in the country know this well, but here in the city, because of the city lights that we think about at this time of the year, so often the stars in the heavens are obscured from us. We see some of them, but nothing like the light in

the heavens that appears when you are in the middle of nowhere, when you're in the desert or you're out on a boat at sea. At such times, the heavens are filled, filled with stars. And we know, really, what inspired the Psalmist in Psalm 19 when he wrote, *"The heavens declare, (through the lights that shine in them) the glory of God."*

Well, the ancient people looking up at the heavens, thought of the heavens in different ways. But one of the ways in which they thought about the heavens, especially on starry, starry nights, was to think of God as being behind that darkness, and the stars were like pinpricks in a panoply, in a canopy, in a tent above us; and that beyond that tent cover, as it were, there was intense light burning forever - a realm of light, emanating from God and drifting into this world of darkness.

Indeed, for some of the ancients, the whole rhythm of night and day, darkness and light, was a reminder to them of the fact that there seemed, in this world, to them, at least, to be a battle raging between light and darkness. And the coming and going of day and night was as if the forces of good and evil would move in one direction and then in another, back and forth. Those stars shining at night and the brightness of the sun in the day were evidence to them that the darkness would not win this particular battle. The two sides would rage, but light would win in the end.

I don't know if you remember that ancient hymn from the Fourth Century, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence"? The third verse goes like this:

"Rank on rank, the host of Heaven spreads its vanguard on the way, as the light of light descendeth from the realms of endless day.

That the powers of hell may vanish, as the darkness clears away."

Do you hear what's being said there? There is this sense that there is a realm (this is Heaven, beyond the panoply that is the sky - a realm of endless day, of endless light, where God's light, God's presence, God's glory, shines in power forever and ever.

And that light is coming into this world where there is darkness.

And that its light will not be overcome by the darkness. It will win over the darkness, until the darkness finally goes away. The battle will be won.

But how will the battle be won in this fight between light and darkness, not just literal, but now moral and spiritual? How will it be won? Well, says, the hymn writer, it will not be won by force of arms. It will not be won by a show of who is most powerful. But it will be won by a descent, a humility, an act of enormous love that somehow will disarm all the powers of evil, all the powers of darkness, and leave the powers of darkness with no strength or power at all. Indeed, this is what we believe happened on that first Christmas, that the 'light of light' became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, descending into our realm, and not merely to be clothed in flesh as a baby, but then, as Paul says in the second chapter of Philippians, to continue that descent through his life, in obedience to God, until he dies on the cross at Calvary, under the hand of evil people, being crucified, as if the powers of darkness take a hold of this one who enters their realm, as if to crush him. But he is not crushed. As if to snuff out the light, but the light is not snuffed out. They've done everything they can, and in the end they are powerless to destroy this one who brings God's light into the world. And in that moment, darkness, as it were, flees and vanishes, and, while there are still lingering skirmishes, has been conquered forever.

In some ways, as we think about Jesus coming into the world as the light of the world, we need to think of him - at least this helps me - to think of him like a magnet; like a vortex or a black hole. That here is the light, and into this light, he draws all of the darkness of the world and he says,

"I can take it. It doesn't matter what they do to me, I can take it.

Give it to me," he says to the world, to the universe, and to us.

"Give your darkness to me. Do not deny it. Do not hide it. Do not pretend that it does not exist. But give it to me. Let it enter me, and I will carry it and bury it. I will encompass it with light that will still shine forever. I will take it away."

"But here's the rub," he says. "When I take it away, when I carry it for you, I want you to carry my light with you from this moment on, into the world. I will take your darkness and I will give to you my light, and I charge you to be the bearers of that light, into the world."

It's an old image, but it's still a good image. Perhaps you remember World War II and the impact of D-Day. As some people have said, "The outcome of the war was established at D-Day; we knew who was going

to win. But it did not mean that the battles were over. The battles would still continue.”

The light came into the world and overcame the darkness in Jesus. But he says to us, “I’m looking for light bearers to take my light into every nook and cranny of this world in which there is darkness, to be my foot soldiers in this world. There is work still to be done, and I charge you to do it.”

Turn with me, please, to the insert that you find. We are not going to read all of the verses there. But on the back page, I put together some of the many verses which speak of God’s calling to you and me to reflect the light of Jesus Christ in this world. So he comes to us; he descends into this world. He takes on the battle with darkness. And the Scripture says that in his humility he disarms darkness, and that darkness begins to flee. But the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament say that we are to carry on this task.

As Isaiah writes (60:1), he says to you and me, as well to the people of ancient Israel, “*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Here is what you must now do. “I will give you, as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the Earth.”* And we may say, ‘But my light is flickering’ but Christ says to us that it’s his light burning in us, that others will see and must see.” Isaiah 58, “*Offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noon day.”* Bear my light in practical ways into the world.

Romans 13, “*The night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*

And Jesus in Matthew 5: “*You are the light of the world*” (He says this to the disciples who will run away from him when he is crucified; when he is in the midst of the pitched battle with darkness. And so he says it to us, as well!) “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand and it gives light to all in the house.”*

Yes, this is what God wants to do through us, in the same way. “*Let your light shine before others, not so that they may see you, but so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven.”*

Paul's writing, down towards the bottom, Ephesians (5:8), *"For once, you were darkness. But now in the Lord, you are light. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."*

And First Peter (2:9), *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood; a holy nation; God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness, into this marvelous light."*

Then two other verses, underlining the ultimate triumph of light over darkness. Let us read in unison.

Isaiah 9:2. *"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. In him was life and the life was the light of all people."*

John 1:4 *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."*

Here comes the light, through Jesus Christ, through even us, to others!

- Like the dawn of a new day over the ocean, or in the midst of a city.
- Like the fiery heat of summer, or the glistening of the winter sun on snow.
- Like a laser with power to cut through or to heal.
- Like the beauty of the light in our windows when the sun is shining; or of the candles in our sanctuary when it is dark all around and Christmas is here.
- Like the light of those angels coming to the shepherds,
- or like the light of the star with the Magi.

All of these, perhaps, describe the light of Jesus coming to us. Maybe some of them describe the impact of our lives on others. But the light has come, and we now must go in response to the one who came as light to us.

Let us pray. Holy God, our lives our small, but yet you come to us. You come to carry our darkness away, and to lead us into the realm of eternal and everlasting light. And even now, you come to shine your light into us so that through our lives, your light might be carried into this broken world. We earnestly pray that you would use us in your service; give meaning to our lives, and through our lives, give meaning to others. It is through Jesus Christ, the light of the world, that we pray. Amen.

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