

## Jesus – The Light of the World

4<sup>th</sup> Week of Advent

December 20, 2020

UMC Geneva IL

As a child of missionaries in West Africa, my parents had one hard and fast rule – NEVER go outside in the dark without a flashlight! One evening I found myself in the dark on the way to our chicken coop to close and lock the door. It was my turn to do that chore. And thank God, I had my flashlight in hand, for as I neared the chicken coop, there in front of me was a 6 foot long spitting cobra who no doubt had a mind to enter the coop in search of eggs! My cries for help were swiftly answered by my father and our African pastor who lived nearby. Both came to my rescue and quickly dispatched the unwelcome intruder!

There's a reason that the twin themes of light and darkness figure so largely in religious traditions around the world. Light and darkness serve as important symbols representing good vs. evil, right from wrong, health vs. sickness, order as opposed to chaos...and ultimately, the forces of life overcoming the forces of death! In our sermon today—this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent—we explore yet another title given to Jesus at his birth. Jesus is the Light...the light of the world!

Perhaps you noticed that our Gospel lesson today echoed the Creation Story found on the very first page of our Bible: “In the beginning...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 light was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Theologians refer to Jesus in this magnificent description of his birth as the “Cosmic Christ” – the light and love of the universe!

Yes, light shines in the darkness! The Word became flesh. And the One who once shouted, “Let there be light!” came to us in Jesus. This is Incarnation! The Word—the creative power and wisdom of God that spoke all things into existence took on flesh as an infant in Bethlehem. As Pastor Adam Hamilton points out in his book on the Incarnation, there are two broad categories of darkness in the Scriptures. The first is moral darkness, and the second is situational or existential darkness. (1)

We know moral darkness well. Not only is it all around us, the fact is, it can be found within us as well. Moral darkness is certainly found in terrorist attacks and mass shootings, the abuse of children, structural racism, sexism, ageism and the like. But it can also be found in our selfish attitudes and acts that harm others...in our failure to live up to God's standards in the 10 Commandments – commandments that Jesus boiled down to just two: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – and love your neighbor as yourself. Failure in these areas is moral darkness. Fact is, every one of us has also experienced existential darkness as well...whether through grief and loss and depression...or feelings of sadness and loneliness, or the sense that we are lost or unloved. We all know existential darkness, do we not?

Christmas – the Incarnation of God in the birth of Jesus – is God's loving response to both forms of darkness: moral and existential. When Jesus began his public ministry as an adult, he boldly proclaimed his mission here on earth. He announced, loudly and clearly, that mission, and precisely how he would be bringing God's light into the darkness of our lives, our world and creation. He called it "the Kingdom of God." His mission was to inaugurate – to start bringing God's light and love into the world by establishing the Kingdom of God - the reign and rule of God – individually in persons' hearts and lives, and collectively in society and creation. Some of us prefer to say that in Jesus, God's light and love breaks into the world as Jesus sets about creating "his beloved community" here on earth.

Personally, I like the way Dutch theologian Johannes Verkuyl puts it in his book on Christian mission in the modern world. He tells us that "the kingdom of God is that new order of affairs begun in Christ which, when finally completed by him, will involve a proper restoration not only of humanity's relationship to God, but also of those between the sexes, generations, races, and even between us humans and nature." (2) He goes on to describe Christ's Kingdom (and our participation in it) as a struggle...struggle against every form of human ill – whether that be sin, or physical and psychological distress; the burden of ignorance, poverty and hunger; or racial discrimination and yes, the threat of approaching death.

In short, Christ's kingdom continues to break into the world...our world...whenever and wherever evil is being overcome by good, truth-telling replaces lies, sickness is overcome by health, hunger and poverty replaced with plentiful food and economic well-being. Christ's Kingdom breaks into our world, and God's beloved community is established, as peace and joy fill our lives, and our community and world are transformed by God's love, compassion and justice.

Today we celebrate the Light and Love of God breaking into our darkness in the birth of Jesus. We also remember what Jesus told his disciples when he informed them: "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14) Thus, as followers of Jesus today, our mission is to share Jesus's love and light in our world – that means our families, neighbors and churches, our community and world. As we journey toward the birth of Jesus, let's celebrate his Light by sharing his Light...his Life...and his Love right now...today! Amen.

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- (1) Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas*. Abingdon Press, 2020, pp. 125-127.
- (2) J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, pp. 198, 202-2-3.