

Choose the Light

John 1:1-14

Farmville Baptist Church

December 25, 2022

What is the darkest place you've ever been? For me, the place with the most literal dark I experienced was when I was a teenager on a school trip. We were caving with an experienced guide, and we were hundreds of feet down in the earth when we came to a large chamber. The guide had us sit very still, and then turn off our headlamps. And whew! That was some pitch-black darkness! I literally couldn't see my hand in front of my face, much less the person next to me or the cave-wall on the other side of the room. With no light-source, my eyesight was completely cut off. Have you ever experienced darkness like that?

There are very few places in the modern world where we experience such deep darkness. I was outside on Wednesday night, the longest night of the year – but it wasn't very dark to me. Our porch light was on. The streetlamp at the gas station a few hundred feet away was shining bright.

Headlights from passing cars flared and dimmed. While I waited for our dog to finish up her business, I pulled out my phone, with the glare of the screen drawing my eye. And, even were all of these electrically- and battery-powered light sources eliminated, the stars above would still be twinkling down.

Yet even with all the ways that we have learned to banish the darkness – and, indeed, to permanently exile true darkness as long as the electricity stays on – the idea of the dark is still an existential threat for most human beings. From the earliest of ages, we feel safest in a room with

enough light, and as parents we plug night-lights in for our children to hold back the dark. For those of us who have experienced eye issues, whether from trauma, age, or genetics, we feel an outsized fear that our eyesight will diminish or go away. And, perhaps most tellingly, the idea of “the dark” has a powerful metaphorical hold on our imaginations, where we use the concept to describe the things that make us afraid, the things that we judge as evil, the things that we don’t understand. Darkness is a powerful reality, whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual – and when we think it has overcome or even conquered us, we can be driven to despair or madness.

That’s not unusual. There are real reasons to fear, or at least be nervous, in the dark, and so “the dark” is a useful metaphor for the things that make us feel uncomfortable or uncertain or unsafe. The men and women of our parents’ or

grandparents' generation named the creep of Nazi or Soviet domination in Europe a dark event, and longed, as the hit song put it, for the day "when the lights come on again all over the world."¹ African slaves faced a dark passage across the ocean to an even darker reality in the Americas. Our ancestors, struggling to survive in medieval times, belonged to what we think of as the Dark Ages, a time when the lack of knowledge and the threats of sickness, war, and famine held a constant sword over the head of virtually everyone alive. And all the way back in first-century Palestine, the dark included the oppression of Roman military conquest, illness and malnutrition, and the daily realities of lives that were hard and often short.

But some people became aware that there was a light – a new hope that was kindled in a dark world.

¹ Song by Vaughn Monroe

For Matthew, the first Gospel we turn to in the New Testament, that light was embodied by the star of Bethlehem, a beacon drawing all and sundry to the birth of God's Messiah. For Luke, the light shines in the appearances of the angels to Zechariah, to Mary, to the shepherds; it is the glimpse behind the veil, the flashlight of heavenly glory breaking forth in the dark cave of earthly reality. And for the writer of the Gospel of John, the light was Jesus himself, the embodiment of God's work at creation, and the champion, or savior, for all of the people who walk in darkness – for all the people, everywhere.

The beginning of John's Gospel paints this picture of Christ as Light in bold brushstrokes. His Gospel has no birth story, no glimpse into the manger and no angel choirs in the fields. Instead, the story opens on a dark world – and the Light of Jesus arriving in that world, making his dwelling

among us. This is John's birth story, his Christmas story.²

So on this Christmas morning, let's ponder his revelation of Jesus as the Light shining in the darkness.

The first thing we note is that light is part of Jesus' life-giving nature. "In the beginning," John tells us, Jesus was with God. If we flip back to the very first page of our Scriptures, we read that God was in the great nothingness that existed at the beginning, and then he *spoke*. He spoke a word: "Let there be light!" And there was light. Light was the very start of all of reality, and ultimately the source of what makes life possible. This life- and light-initiating word, according to John 1, was Jesus.

Yet with the coming of light, there was still darkness. Darkness was the antithesis, the absence, of light – and theologians and philosophers, priests and prophets, and

² As John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg point out in their book, *The First Christmas*, on page 180

multitudes of ordinary people wrestling with the reality of life and the meaning of all things, have used that duality of light and dark to describe other antitheses in life. Good and evil, life and death. Darkness is always present whenever light is not. It seems to conquer all – except light. And John notes that this is true of Jesus, too: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Somehow, the light of Jesus – his teaching, his love, his very presence with us – it endures in the face of whatever else life brings our way. It can sustain us when we are hurt, when we grieve, when we are scared, when we are confused, when we are overwhelmed. Whatever comes our way, Jesus stays with us and can sustain us, if we will let him. Jesus is for us “a light...in dark places, when all other lights go out.”³

³ JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 376

Finally, John's Gospel tells us that this light, the presence and love of Jesus that comforts us in our distress and shines for us in the dark, is not for us alone. "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." No person, no religious group, no nation-state holds claim to Jesus Christ. Jesus is given by God to the world, because God loves the world – all people, all places, all of creation. The light shines out in the darkness, not as our own circle of light alone, but everywhere. So, like John the prophet, commonly called John the Baptist, we who have received the light have a responsibility: we are to share that light with others. As British author and mystic Evelyn Underhill wrote,

"The birth of Christ in our souls is for a purpose beyond ourselves: it is because his manifestation in the world must be through us. Every Christian is, as it were, part of the dust-laden air which shall radiate the glowing epiphany of God, catch and reflect his golden Light. *Ye*

are the light of the world – but only because you are enkindled, made radiant by the one Light of the world. And being kindled, we have got to get on with it, be useful.”⁴

On this Christmas Sunday, I wonder where the light of Christ will kindle flame in our own lives. Where is there darkness in me and in you that needs the love of Christ to come and cast aside the shadows? Where can the light of Jesus show us the way forward? This Christmas, will you let the light in? And then, once it has sparked in our hearts, what will we do with it? What darkness is there around us that needs the loving presence of Jesus to bring hope and peace, joy and love? And how can we – you and me – be bearers of the light to others who need it? How can we be kindled – and then, once kindled, how can we testify to the light and be useful?

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, quoted in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, reading for December 18.