

# “The Inextinguishable Light”

a sermon by

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Text: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

When the stories of Jesus’ birth took form in the early church they emphasized the fact that it was night when Jesus was born. The shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night. The wise men were following a star at night. In Herod’s gloomy midnight council it was determined that the little children of Bethlehem were to be killed.

Sometimes people say that it is hard to observe Christmas in the world in which we live. After all, there is war in Iraq, starvation in the Sudan, suicide bombers in Bethlehem, and deep unrest and trouble in the urban centers of our nation.

This is indeed a dark time, but if we are to believe the stories of Christmas, the world into which Jesus was born had its share of darkness. In easier times we might have made the Christmas holiday a bit more festive and merry, but it is hard to do that today, for we are back where Christmas started--with its deep, black background behind the Savior’s coming, like

midnight behind the star. That is the message of Christmas. As Philips Brooks puts it in the great Carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem,"

'Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The everlasting light,  
The hopes and fears of all the years,  
Are met in thee tonight.'"

## I.

Nearly a hundred years after the birth of Christ the writer of the Gospel of John was still thinking of the birth of Christ in terms of a light shining in the darkness. John, too, lived in a world filled with great darkness. He lived in the ancient city of Ephesus, where the goddess Diana was worshipped under the image of a meteorite stone, and in an age shadowed by paganism and violence. Yet, something had happened that, as Clement of Alexandria later put it, had "changed sunset into sunrise." Christ had come, and all through his Gospel John speaks of him in terms of light. "In him," John writes, "was life; and the life was the light of all men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Surely, that is a Christmas text for us now. Not after one century, but after twenty centuries, we can say at least this much about the radiance that Christ has kindled in our world. The darkness has never overcome it. There is no more important announcement of Christmas than to say that all of the forces of darkness have never been able to overcome what happened in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

## II.

God knows they have tried hard enough. From Herod's bloody plot to slay the children of Bethlehem, to Caiaphas and Pilate, the Gospel's portray the mad endeavors of dark powers to put out the flame of life and hope. But they have never been successful. About thirty-five years after the death of Christ the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about the early Christian movement, "though checked for the time being, broke out afresh not only in Judea, where the mischief started, but also at Rome, where all manner of horrible and loathsome things pour in and become fashionable." So from the very first, to a scholar such as Tacitus it seemed incredible that the flame that was kindled at the birth of Christ should go on burning. Here is the marvel of history, not that the world is dark--it has always been that--but that we have a radiant spiritual heritage, coming down through the centuries, that all the hosts of evil have not been able to quench.

That is something for which we ought to rejoice--particularly in the time in which we live: when the House of Representatives of the United States suspends its own ethics rules to protect one of its members; when our own government is either unwilling or incapable of providing adequate protection for our soldiers in Iraq; when professional basketball players go into the stands to attack fans. In times like these I am grateful for the light that it given to us in Christ. In times like these I am grateful for the soldiers who have fought valiantly in Iraq--for the 180 soldiers of the 211 members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit in Iraq who were wounded in combat but who have insisted on returning to active duty. In times like these I am

grateful for the great art and music that represent the best of Western Civilization and that bear witness to the enormous power of the light that has shined in Jesus Christ.

### III.

Then, too, we rejoice in the light of the birth of Christ not only because of the great heritage of spiritual illumination we claim, but also because it presents us with a person who in fact has demonstrated that light can overcome darkness. That is the great claim of our faith. In John's gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

William Gladstone, the great Prime minister of England, once observed that "one example is worth a thousand arguments." That was certainly true of Jesus. Who could have imagined that a child born in a manger in a stable in an small obscure town in the land of Judea would one day split history into a before and after? And yet, that is what Jesus Christ has done.

Some years ago I had the opportunity to enjoy the friendship of Dr. Paul Lehman, who for many years taught systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York and at the Harvard Divinity School. When Paul Lehman was in New York years ago, he met a young German theological student by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was teaching in New York, but when the war broke out in 1940 he was determined to return to his native Germany. His friend, Paul Lehman, tried to discouraged Bonhoeffer from returning, but Bonhoeffer felt that if he did stand with Germany during the war, he would be unable to do so after the war. So he returned to his native country. He was part of a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He was arrested by the SS, sentenced to prison, and hanged by the SS on April 8, 1945, just a few days before the camp was liberated.

His last words to his fellow prisoners before his death were these: "This is not the end of life for me, but the beginning." In his death he bore witness to the light that no darkness could extinguish.

To be sure, there is something stern about light. It has a way of exposing darkness. Yet, our hope is that when light enters into the world, it creates a standard by which everything must be judged. We would never know evil, if we did not know good. We would never understand darkness, if we did not understand light.

So may we keep Christmas in our hearts this year. The light that shone in Bethlehem is alive and well in our world. It shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.  
Amen!

