

# “Recovering the Christ of Christmas: 3) The Light of the World”

a sermon by

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Text: “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

When the stories of Jesus’ birth took form in the early church they emphasized the fact that it was night when he was born. The shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night; the wise men were following the star through the night; in Herod’s gloomy midnight councils Herod gave the order that all the little children of Bethlehem were to be killed. On this point the New Testament seems to be quite clear. The birth of the Christ child took place in the context of great darkness.

Nearly a hundred years after Bethlehem the writer of the Fourth Gospel was still thinking about Christ’s advent in terms of light and darkness. John, too, lived in a difficult world, in Ephesus, where the goddess Diana was worshipped under the image of a meteorite stone and in an age shadowed by paganism and violence.

Yet, John was convinced that something decisive had happened in the birth of Christ. A light had shined in the darkness. As Clement of Alexandria later put it, “the sunset was changed

into sunrise.” John speaks of Jesus in terms of light. “In him,” he writes in the Prologue to the Gospel, “was life; and the life was the light of men.”

In the passage that we have read from this morning Jesus says to those around him, “I am the light of the world.” Surely, that is a Christmas text for us now.

## I.

So let’s be honest. We are a people living in darkness. In his book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, Mitch Albom tells of the day that his friend and teacher Morrie Schwartz was told by the neurologist that he had Lou Gehrig’s disease. “Outside,” Morrie observed, “the sun was shining and people were going about their business. A woman ran to put money in the parking meter. Another carried groceries.” Morrie was stunned by the normalcy of the world around him. “Shouldn’t the world stop?” he asked. “Don’t they know what has happened to me?”

I think this is the hardest part of Christmas. All around us there seems so much frivolity: carols being sung, decorations being lit, parties being held, families coming together. And yet for many people this is the most difficult season of the year. For some it will be the first Christmas without their mother or father around to celebrate the holiday. For the children of parents who are divorced or separated it will mean another round of being ferried about between a warring mother and father. For some this will be the first Christmas since the death of a husband or a wife. For some it will be the first Christmas since the death of a child. And amidst the children laughing, the carolers caroling there will be the ache.... “Don’t they know what has happened to me?”

## II.

To say that Christ is the light of the world is to affirm that the powers of darkness, no matter how strong they may appear to be, are not the final word. Thirty-five years after the death of Jesus the Roman historian Tacitus wrote in astonishment and indignation that the movement that began in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had not been contained. “This pestilent superstition,” Tacitus wrote, “though checked for the time being, broke out afresh, not only in Judea, where the mischief started, but also in Rome, where many horrible and loathsome things pour in and become fashionable.”

As we approach this Christmas season, we too are very aware of the darkness that surrounds us. At the start of the season of Ramadan a suicide bomber walked into a mosque in Halla, Iraq, and in the middle of a funeral service killed himself and a number of the mourners who had gathered there. Then just two weeks ago three suicide bombers walked into a Radisson Hotel in Amman, Jordan, during a wedding reception killing a number of members of the wedding party and the guests that had gathered there.

We understand the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2). We know the darkness. We know there is war in Iraq and

Afghanistan. We know of the terrible devastation that has taken place in Pakistan as well as on the Gulf Coast of the United States.

This is the marvel of Christmas, not that there is darkness--that has always been the case. No, the marvel of Christmas is that in Jesus Christ a light has shined into the world that no darkness has overcome.

This past summer as I visited again the cities of Florence and Siena in Italy, I was once again made aware of the great force that we call the Renaissance. For almost a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire European civilization experienced a time in which many called the "dark ages". It was a time of great brutality, suffering, and ignorance. But something very powerful began to happen. It became obvious in art, music, and literature. A light shined in the darkness and the world was changed.

### III.

Then, too, we affirm that Jesus is the light of the world because we believe not only that his birth marks the incarnation of God, but because we believe that his death and resurrection give us strength and power to overcome the forces of evil in our lives. Dr. John Leith once observed that there is a certain joy that is given to each of us in the joy of creation. There is much about the world around us that we celebrate and give thanks for. There is wonder, mystery, and beauty in so many elements of life.

But if the joy of creation is the only joy we know, we shall not long experience that. For the joys of this world are transient and can come to an abrupt end unless there is some deeper joy. No merely human joy can sustain itself against the inevitable frustration, failure and disappointments of life, to say nothing of the final fact of death. There is in the end no joy at all unless there is something more than the joy of created existence. The joy of Christmas must be undergirded by the profounder joy of the crucifixion and Easter.

This year there is a lot of controversy about Christmas. Christmas and holiday greetings have become the latest casualties in the culture wars about the secular nature of a religious holiday in a pluralistic society.

But, we should not forget that the celebration of Christmas has always been controversial. No one knows when Christ was born, although it is almost certain that he was not born in December (since there are no shepherds in the fields of Palestine in the winter). The celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25 was only begun in the Fourth Century A. D.

The Protestant Reformers of Geneva and the Puritans of England eliminated the celebration of Christmas in part because they knew how easy it was to turn it into a festival of nature. Today, we are all aware of how easy it is to turn Christmas into a commercial festival and a reservoir of sappy feelings of goodwill and cheer. That is why the early church

always gave priority to the celebration of the crucifixion and Easter. When the birth of Christ is not seen in the light of his death and resurrection, it is easy to turn Christmas into an occasion to rejoice simply into a pagan festival.

One of the books that has had a great impact on me is Norman MacLean's little book *A River Runs Through It*. Part of my fascination with this book is that it combines two of the loves of my life, preaching and fly-fishing. MacLean begins his book with this sentence, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." MacLean's father was a Presbyterian minister whose family lived in western Montana at the junction of two great trout streams.

But it is not only a story about fly-fishing. It is a story about two brothers, Norman and Paul. Norman was the older brother, who received his Ph.D. and taught English at the University of Chicago. Paul was the younger brother, the gifted fisherman who stayed in Montana, gambled and drank heavily and was one day killed in a fight over unpaid gambling debts. Both father and older brother sought desperately to understand this gifted young man. Finally, the father concludes that there are some people we are called to love, even though we will never understand them. As he put it, "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

When Jesus was born and entered our mortal frame, God was burrowing down into the marrow of our grief. Simeon was right when he warned Mary, the mother of Jesus, that "a sword will pierce your soul." All of our souls are pierced. We all suffer inevitable losses. But God is there, beside us, beneath us, around us and within us. That is what Christmas is about.

#### IV.

Then, too, it is the "light of the world" that helps to guide us on our way, not only in this Christmas season, but also in every season of our lives. That is why the claim of Jesus in the Gospel of John, "I am the light of the world," must also be held in tension with the command of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew's gospel that they are to be the "light of the world." Jesus reminds us that, "a city built on a hill cannot be hid. We are not to hide our light under a bushel but to put it on a stand where it will shine." (Matthew 5:14-16).

One of the major adjustments of my life came several years ago when my youngest daughter, Lucy, announced to me her intention to attend Duke University. As most of you know, I am an unrepentant graduate of Davidson College. The years I attended Davidson coincided with a young basketball coach by the name of "Lefty" Driesell and the basketball rivalry that took place in those days between Davidson and Duke had left a deep impression on me that was not easily overcome. That is why I was encouraged to read these remarks spoken recently to a group of Duke parents by the President of Duke University, Richard H. Brodhead. "Since in modern America the notion prevails that getting your kid into a selective college is the highest known parental attainment and possibly your mission on Earth, you may also be feeling twinges of self-congratulation. And why not? Your kid goes to Duke! Your life's work is done."

But our life's work is not done. The call of Christ is a call to enter into the world of human pain and suffering and to transform that world by the grace and light of Christ.

Howard Thurman once spoke of the 'work of Christmas' in this fashion:

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among brothers, to make music in the heart.”

That is the light of Christmas, and that is the light that can never be put out.

Amen!