

# “God in the Darkness”

a sermon by

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

There are certain passages of scripture which are, by their very nature, often relegated by the church to a particular season of the church year. This passage from John is one of them. The opening words of John’s gospel, like the opening words of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, are commonly, if not exclusively read by the church during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. This makes sense - these are the words, different in each gospel which together tell us the old story - the familiar, comforting, foundational story of our faith - the story of how it was that God came to dwell in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ.

During December, as we prepare ourselves for the celebration of this majestic and miraculous event, we hear these words proclaimed from the pulpit, we read them in story form and sing them as anthems and hymns. In Advent and Christmas, we Christians practically soak ourselves in the words of the Gospel writers about the coming of the messiah. And then, in January, we tend to pack these words away and turn to other passages for the next 11 months.

That is okay, of course, but so is reading these words out of season, as we do today. At Christmastime we need to hear the story of the coming of the savior as the light into a world in darkness. These words are pivotal to our Christmas celebration, and our need for them is practically palpable as the days get shorter and colder. But on a Sunday in September, that need is no less real, the words no less meaningful and significant.

There is something breathtaking, I think, about John’s description of the coming of Christ. “In the beginning,” he writes, echoing the words of Genesis. *In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Lest you doubt the divinity of Christ, John lays it out for you upfront. Jesus was with God from the beginning, and is, in fact God. Nothing has come to be without him. This is important, but so is the next point. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

This poetic and expressive language, typical to John and so different from the other three gospels, opens our eyes to a different aspect of Christ's life and ministry. Where Matthew, Luke and to a lesser extent, Mark, focus on the very human beginnings of Christ's life on earth, John launches right into theological discourse, bringing his reader face to face with the transcendent reality of the divinity of the Messiah before rooting his feet firmly upon the earth.

And then there's the imagery. What strikes me every time I read or hear this passage is this one line... *the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it*. In all of the accounts of the miracle of Christ's birth, the ministry of his life, the misery of his crucifixion and the glory of his resurrection, few other words pack the kind of punch of faith that these do. Throughout scripture, with its grand narratives and theological prose, beautiful poetry and compelling prophecies, few passages convey the reality of our God and his power, love and presence like this one.

The image of light and darkness is elemental. It is real for all creatures in a way other things are not. The cycles of light and darkness set our calendars, rule our routines. And they symbolize so much for us. We know something about light, and much about darkness, and so in John's words, we are offered a new and profound insight into who our God is, and how our God works.

Light, for us, often symbolizes life, and hope and energy, while darkness evokes thoughts of isolation, fear, and death. Though we physically cycle through each every 24 hours, we sometimes tend to forget that our lives cycle through them as well, as we journey through the joys and the pains of our human existence. We try in so many ways to manage and control this, to force the lights to keep shining, to try to avoid or minimize the darkness on our own.

We think that if we control the light, we can avert the darkness. If we are strong enough or smart enough, work hard enough or care enough, if we have enough faith, surely we can keep the light burning, and keep the darkness at bay. We think that, sure, but we don't really believe it. Because no matter how hard we try, we will all, at some point, be touched by the darkness.

Perhaps this is why the image of the light shining in the darkness is such a powerful one for us. It's an image we need, an image we can relate to, for like our Biblical forebears, like Job and Hannah, like Rachel and Paul and like the psalmist, we all experience the darkness. Psalm 88, read this morning, confronts the darkness head on and refuses to back down. This is lament in its purest form, and it is the only lament that does not, at some point, offer some word of hope or praise.

It steps boldly into the darkness and stays there. It lays out the tragedy and suffering in a no-holds-barred kind of way, cataloguing the trouble and refusing to sugarcoat it. It cries out into the darkness, beseeching, demanding that God respond.

But just because it does not proclaim hope doesn't mean the psalmist doesn't know or experience the light. For it is like a match struck in the deepest recesses of a cave. The darkness, though heavy and pervasive, is impotent to stop the tiniest bit of light. Though the psalmist rages and grieves, still he calls out to God, trusting that somehow, someday, God is there, listening.

Like the tiniest flame in the darkest cavern, God is real and present even in the most terrible of situations. If I don't believe this, then why would I cry out to God to hear me? If some part of me doesn't trust that God is real to me even in my suffering, then what on earth would be the point of addressing God in the first place?

This psalm, this lament without praise, is the ultimate expression of faith. The psalmist doesn't have to hear God or experience his presence to know that he is there. He doesn't have to understand what is going on or why he is suffering so badly. Just knowing is enough, he seems to be conveying. Just knowing God is there is enough to keep going. It doesn't solve the problem and it doesn't stop the pain, but it somehow makes it possible to move forward.

This is a lesson I began learning long before I wanted to, long before I was really able to. I was 12 years old when my aunt Carol, my mother's younger sister, died tragically of a rare strain of pneumonia. At only 39, Carol, the wife of a Presbyterian minister and mother of three amazing kids, was one of the most luminous, loving and likable people you'd ever hope to meet. She was the kind of person who lit up a room, who made everyone around her feel special. She was vibrant and energetic, funny and kind. And then one day, she was gone.

My memories from the time of Carol's illness and death are patchy, but powerful. There are snapshots of telephone conversations bearing hope and then bringing tragedy, and an agonizing drive down to Miami under an incomprehensibly joyful blue Florida sky. There is the sadness and grief etched upon the faces of my mom and her brother, my cousins and my grandparents. And then there's my uncle's voice.

My uncle Tim is the only other Presbyterian minister in our family. At the time of Carol's death, he was serving a large church in Miami and thriving there. Tim is one of the best preachers I have ever known, and he has one of the best preacher voices I have ever heard. That voice, with its resonance and confidence is such a part of my childhood, and served as the voice of authority on matters religious and theological.

We had been in Miami for maybe a day - we were all gathered at the house as people came and went - you know, how we do it when someone dies. The phone had been ringing off the hook and Tim had tirelessly answered the calls, accepting the love and also, amazingly, ministering to his congregation, who were themselves in shock and grief at this profound loss.

They were saying, I can only imagine, the things people say at times such as this - offering condolences and support, and occasionally, trying to make sense of that which did not make sense. At one point, Tim answered the phone and had a brief conversation, at the end of which he slammed the phone down on its receiver and turned to mom and said with great force, "if one more person tells me this was God's will, I am going to lose it. God did not cause this - God did not take Carol away from me and from our kids."

Though I was only twelve at the time, the message hit home. My uncle the minister, the grieving husband and father, the representative of the church, flatly rejected the notion that God had somehow willed this tragedy. In that one act, those few words, Tim disabused me forever of the image of a vengeful God who chooses people at random to take from this world before their

time, and reminded me - reminded us all - that God was not the cause of our pain, but surely was with us in it. It is something for which I am eternally grateful to my uncle.

You see, my family was immersed in the darkness. Never before had any of us suffered so profound a loss, and we were rendered mute. No one could explain it, no one could make it go away. It was terrible, it was awful, it was unfair and it was real. It would have been so easy to try to find a way out of it - to rationalize or deny - anything to avoid confronting the darkness. But no one would do that.

It is one of the great gifts of that time, I believe, that the faithful, grieving adults in my family refused to ignore the darkness, but also refused to give into it completely. Instead, they walked into it with the confidence of a people who knew that the darkness was not all there was. For somehow they saw the light in the darkness, understood that God was with us all, even at the deep dark recesses of grief. It didn't make it better - nothing did, nothing will. The loss is still as profound today as it was all those years ago. But somehow, by refusing to blame it on God, by refusing to turn away from God, by leaning fully and completely on faith, my family made it through that time, everyone bruised but no one broken.

As I reflected recently on that time, and on Carol's memorial service, something interesting came to me. I hadn't thought much about it until now, but I remembered, amazingly, the dress I wore that day. It was the same dress I had worn just about a month before, on the Sunday I was confirmed. Though I thought nothing of it at the time, when I remembered it, it struck me as significant. The dress, an actual physical, tangible item, which was with me on the day I professed my faith in Jesus Christ and joined the church, just a few weeks later cloaked me on the hardest day of my life. There is a continuity there that says something to me about the life of faith. It's a small thing, I know, and no doubt it is a girl thing, but it is no less significant.

At the end of her memorial service, there in a packed sanctuary where he preached every Sunday, where he had officiated countless funerals and weddings, baptized many babies, Tim stood up and pronounced the benediction. Looking back now, I am certain that he could not have done that had he not believed what he said. He could not have spoken words of blessing did he not believe at the core of who he was that, as in the best moments, even at the worst moment of his life, God was with him.

You see, the spark that burns within each of us compelling us to faith in the good times in life is the same spark that shines through the bad times. The God we praise and adore when all is going well is the God we tumble into when all is falling apart. He does not change and he does not go away. There are not two different gods, one who hands out candy and treats, and one who deals death and destruction. There is one God, under whose sovereign care we all live, who is with us, guiding, supporting and sustaining us through both the good and the bad. The light is the light is the light, whether it burns like the noonday sun or flickers like a candle in the wind.

As sure as the sun sets each evening, the darkness comes into our lives. It takes many forms - depression, anxiety, divorce, job loss, addiction, infirmity, disease, crime, tragedy, death. We are not immune from the darkness, nor were we ever promised to be. Anyone who tells you that is selling something.

What we are promised, though is what we stake our faith on - that in Jesus Christ, God's light came into the world that we might never face the darkness alone. When we are in the pit, in the trenches, in despair, sometimes barely holding on, the tiny thread to which we cling, the one that in the end proves strong as steel is this promise- the darkness is real, but it is not the end and it does not hold the power.

In Jesus Christ, light came into the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Thanks be to God.