

***The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light:
Love Is a Gift***

1 John 4:7-12, John 3:16-21

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I have always been drawn to the biblical contrast between light and darkness. And Advent is one of those times when the image of light shining in darkness plays a prominent role—from the star shining over Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus, to the prologue of John's gospel in which John proclaims that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light¹, to the verse which has served as our jumping-off point for the Sundays in Advent: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned². And in our observances of the season we make great use of the lights—whether it be Christmas lights on trees or houses, or the soft lights of the candles we light on each Sunday of Advent.

In the Bible light is used for different purposes. Sometimes the purpose of the light is to reveal what is hidden in the darkness. God shines the light of his glory and majesty into the darkness of the world, and he reveals the brokenness and unrighteousness that is in us. The use of forensic science is a big deal these days, thanks to TV shows like CSI and NCIS. And often in those shows the evidence that ends up tying a suspect to a case is hidden until the investigators shine a special light that reveals something otherwise invisible to the naked eye. In the same way the light of God's glory and holiness often serves to help us see our sinfulness and flaws more plainly. God's light reveals what is wrong with the world.

Sometimes light is used to guide the way. Lighthouses pepper the coastline, warning ships of danger and guiding them into safe harbor. Luminaries line streets and sidewalks at night this time of the year. In the same way God uses light to show us the way: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."³ God shines his light to lead us and guide us through the darkness.

And sometimes light offers a way out of the darkness. People who explore caves are relieved when they look up and they see the light that signifies the opening of the cave and the way out. The night sentry is relieved when he looks out on the horizon and sees the pink hues of the sun. That's the way it is when we light the fourth candle of the Advent wreath, the candle of love, because the light of God's love disperses the darkness around us and we are drawn toward the light. The light of God's love tells us that there is something greater than the darkness that enshrouds us. The light of God's love tells us that God sent his son, not to condemn the world, but to save us, to lift us out of the darkness and into his fellowship.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus. But it's about more than the birth of a little boy whose first crib was a manger. The birth of Jesus is about God taking on the form of human flesh and communicating himself to us in a way we can relate to. That's what it means for us to say that Jesus is the

¹ John 1:5

² Isaiah 9:2

³ Psalm 119:105

Incarnation of God—Jesus is God-in-the-flesh.

If you want to know what God is like, then you need to look at Jesus. It is Jesus who reveals to us the heart of God. It is Jesus who reveals to us the character of God. And while the Old Testament is peppered with references to God's steadfast love and compassion and grace and mercy, it is not until after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that we are able to say that God is love, for it is through Jesus that we see God's love poured out for us.

If you want to know what God's love is like, look to Jesus. For it is in Jesus that we see the limits of love expanded to those who are different. It is in Jesus that we see love demonstrated in care for the down-and-out. It is in Jesus that we see love demonstrated through self-giving and sacrifice. It is in Jesus that we see love that welcomes the outcasts and the sinners. It is in Jesus that we see love that embraces you and me with such determination that there is nothing that can ever separate us from his love. It is in Jesus that we see love that cannot be earned by you or me, but love that is freely given. It is in Jesus that we see that there is nothing you can possibly do to make God love you more; neither is there anything you can possibly do that will make God love you any less. It is in Jesus that we see love that is deeper and higher and wider than any of us can measure.

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light... God's answer to the darkness of our world is the light of his love: God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son... God did not send his son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. God's answer to the darkness of our world is not condemnation, but salvation.

Christmas is about love breaking into the world. And in a world where the next pothole a soldier encounters could contain an IED that will kill or maim him; in a world where people who call God "Allah" harbor murderous hatred toward those who call God "Yahweh," and vice-versa; in a world where children in the projects will sleep on a cold floor tonight; in a world where the woman in the nursing home will cry herself to sleep tonight because she's no longer able to do anything for herself—in such a world as ours what more can we hope for than an outbreak of love?

Since God so loved us, let us then love one another.

One of the paradoxical truths about the love we celebrate at Christmastime is that it is something you probably won't find by looking for it; rather, it is something that you will discover by giving it away. In his epistle John says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."⁴

You see, love is not something you can know by reading about it. It is only something you can know by doing it. Love is a gift, and it can only be known when it is given. Revel Howe said, "We do not find love by looking for it. We find it by giving it, and when we find love by loving, we find God. If someone asked, 'How can I find God?' I would answer, 'Go find someone to love and you will find God.'"⁵

"Beloved, let us love one another..."

It is when we love another that we really begin to understand what Christmas is all about.

⁴ 1 John 4:7-8, 12

⁵ John Buchanan quotes Revel Howe in his sermon, "Christmas Eve Sermon," December 24, 2002, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/SermonArchive/2002/122402print.html>

This time of year we crank it up a notch or two when it comes to the busy pace of life. I have to be honest, sometimes I just get weary at the end of the day, with all the Christmas activities added to the already full schedule. On Wednesday I was tired. I had fought a cold for three days, and I hadn't slept well. On the schedule for that evening was Christmas caroling with the children and middle school youth in Willowbank. I have to admit that as the day wore on, part of me just wanted to withdraw and curl up in bed instead of being surrounded by fifty or sixty loud, off-key youngsters. But as we gathered in the fellowship hall for dinner, the room was electric with excitement and energy. We got onto the trolley and trailer and bus and made our way down the streets of Willowbank. Bo was teaching the children some of the songs as we made our way to the homes where we were going to sing.

The look on the faces of the people whose houses we gathered to sing was priceless. The smiles lit up their faces brighter than any Christmas lights on the trees. I don't think it was the music that cheered them up, because we'd be hard-pressed to say that the noise we were making was "music." I think it must have been the love of God that brought warmth and good cheer to the people for whom we sang. It made me forget how tired I had been earlier in the day.

Later on I thought, "Isn't this what it's all about—to share God's love in an otherwise cold, dark world?" That's what Christmas is—God coming into our lives, not in power and might and judgment, but in the faces of innocent children appearing on our doorstep on a cold and lonely night. Christmas is God coming in love, lighting up the darkness with warmth, and transforming us into new creations.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. It is the light of love given to us, for us. "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."⁶

God so loved the world... What more need we add to the Christmas message? Amen.

⁶ 1 John 4:7-8, 12