

Christmas Eve: All is Bright

John 1:1-5

December 24, 2017

Pastor Steve Richards

Last week, I finally set up our Christmas tree. I wasn't planning to put up the tree this year. This will be our first Christmas in 33 years without one of our children with us on Christmas. To be honest, it's not been very Christmassy around our house. I put up lights outside, but inside there is no indication of the season – until last week. I was home alone one evening. I put on Christmas music, set up the tree, and then got out the box of ornaments and it turned into a great evening. I took time with each ornament. Each one has a story. There were the ones cut out of salt dough that Amanda and I made before we were married. Do you see the resemblance? There were the ornaments that our children made – like this one when Bethany was four years old. And finally, I came to this star which has been at the top of the tree every year since Lauren and Bethany were 4 and 5 and made it for the tree. And once the star was at the top of the tree, I felt something – like it's time – I'm ready. I sat in our living room – the only lights the ones from the tree – and I thought about the importance of this season. Even though there won't be any presents under the tree this year, the real gift is what happens here tonight. It's the gift I most want my children to receive. It's a gift they will never outgrow. It came 2000 years ago – not wrapped in a bow and placed under a tree, but in a stable because there was no room in the Inn. It was a baby that lay in a feeding trough. That's the gift I want my daughters and each one of you to receive.

2000 years ago, God came to live among us in a way we could recognize to show us light and life. God came to show us that God is with us always. He is Emmanuel, a Hebrew word that means "God with us." Emmanuel.

This is the night when we remember Mary and Joseph were on the road to Bethlehem. Mary is nine months pregnant, riding a donkey on a rough and bumpy road when she goes into labor. But there is no place to stay. No one to help. So where is their child to be born? – Where? Our nativity scenes are much too sanitized, I think. She delivers her child next to cattle in a dark, dirty, smelly cave. Surely that's not the place they were hoping for. If this is God's own Son, wouldn't you think God could find a better place? But then, John's gospel tells us why – what God was doing. It's what this night is really about. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. John is saying that Jesus has always been – from that first moment when God said, "Let there be light." Jesus was the Word, the power, the life force that has made everything that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. And 2000 years ago, God sent that light into the world in a form that we could see and understand. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In my years as pastor, I have been with people at moments when the darkness seemed insurmountable – an incurable diagnosis, a life-long dream shattered, or you're lost your job, bank account empty, credit cards maxed out and a family to support somehow – or you come home to a note from your husband or wife who says, "I've left and don't want to be married to you anymore." If we live long enough, every one of us will find ourselves overcome by the darkness. But here's what I also know – that darkness will not last – the light can shine through. Maybe you lost a child or your husband or wife. The pain of that loss will be with you a long time, but you will learn to laugh and smile again. God will sustain you.

In Romans 8:28, the apostle Paul wrote: “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.*” God does not cause all things. God does not send the darkness into our lives. Rather, in all things, God forces good to come from them. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “God has a way of wringing good out of evil.” God can take the darkness and create something new. The worst thing is not the last thing. God sent a Life to let the light shine on us.

Shane Stanford is the senior pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis which is among the largest churches in our denomination. When Shane was born in 1970, doctors discovered he was a hemophiliac, a blood disorder that meant his blood did not clot properly. In childhood, there would be times when he had internal bleeding and he would need blood transfusions. In the early 1980s, they were making a product from human blood that might help with the clotting process. So at the age of 13, he began receiving these treatments. By 1986, he wasn't feeling well after the treatments. This was about the time we realized there was a virus that could be passed through blood donations – called HIV. And Shane, as a 16 year old received the diagnosis that he had HIV, and they didn't know how to treat it. His doctor said, “We don't know how long you have to live. It could be a year or two, but we don't know. We're so sorry.”

In his book, *Making Life Matter*, he tells what he did after receiving this news. He went to his grandparent's house, and his grandfather took him for a drive. They went to a hilltop that looked out over a golf course. His grandpa said to him, “Shane, if anybody has a right to get in a corner and have a pity party about this, it's you. This is a really raw deal. But you have a choice to make. You can get in that pity corner and if you want, I'll get in there with you, and we can cry.” And Shane remembers his grandfather's eyes filled with tears as he continued, “But I know you, Shane, and I think you will make another choice. I think you are going to live each day to the fullest with everything you have, and make the most of it.” And that's what he did.

It's the choice we all have. Will we choose every day to push back the darkness and claim the light? Will we choose to live with hope? We can do that because God has brought a life into this world that shine a light on us.

Let me explain it this way. Three and a half months ago, we welcomed a puppy into our home. His name is Winston Churchill – we have hope that he will live into his name! He was 2 months old when we picked him up at the Humane Society. He is a bundle of energy. We like to say he has an “ON” switch and no “OFF” switch. And we are training each other. There's a game that we play. Have you ever played Hide and Seek? One person closes their eyes and counts to a hundred while everyone else hides. Those hiding don't want to be found. That's how you win – you're not found. We play Hide and Seek with Winston. But in our version of the game, it's not about hiding but being found. So Amanda will hold Winston, while I find a hiding place and I'll start calling – “Winston come, Winston come” – and he comes running. He hears my voice and he comes and when he finds me he is so excited. The point is not hiding but finding. I want to be found.

And I think that's what this night is really about. God sent Jesus so that we would know that we have been found. God is with us. God came in a form we could understand – a baby. Tonight the light came into the world to shine right where you are. God wants you to know that you have been found. And if you feel like you are all alone in the darkness, God is saying, I'm right here with you. I have found you. Come find me.

The light shines in the darkness. Choose the light. Welcome the Life. Because the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never and will never extinguish the light.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 24, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Holy God of Love, there is light in our lives because of the abundance of your steadfast love. A love so vast, so deep, so real, that you became one of us. May we live within the power of this love. And may we share its light with a world where too many dwell in darkness. Amen.

Monday, December 25

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Observation: Christmas is one key story about God's Great Reversal. Caesar Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, issued a decree that forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with Mary nine months pregnant. Jesus, the true God become human, spent his first night on earth in a humble animal shelter in Bethlehem. On Christmas Day, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God's kind of power—the power of selfless love.

Application: Scholar William Barclay wrote, hauntingly, "That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it. His search—and his rejection—go on." What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year? How are you making room in your heart, and in your life, for him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were born in a stable, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.

Tuesday, December 26

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Observation: “A child is born to us,” said Isaiah’s prophesy, “a son is given to us.” His words of hope rang through the years. “He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” Maybe life’s darkness wasn’t permanent. In the hope of that amazing, unique birth, the promise that people walking in darkness would see “a great light” seemed worth hoping for.

Application: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.” It was, and is, an awesome promise. Yet even after meeting Jesus, Paul could write, “Now we see a dim reflection” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already lit up your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full glory of God’s light?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, just as the sun rises every morning, your light is always there to illumine my life. Help me keep my vision alert and focused for what your light seeks to show me. Amen.

Wednesday, December 27

Scripture: John 9:1-17

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked. He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.” “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided. Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

Observation: When John wrote that “the life [Jesus] was the light for all people” (John 1:4), he followed Jesus’ lead. Jesus said in the Temple that he was the light of the world (cf. John 8:12), and repeated the claim in verse 5 of today’s reading. His healing of this blind man was like a life-changing, acted-out parable. Jesus’ light gave the beggar back both his physical and spiritual sight.

Application: At what age or stage of life did Christ’s light first shine into your life? What are some of the first things that you remember seeing more clearly in the light of Jesus’ love and grace? What are one or two ways that Christ’s light has helped to give you clearer vision in the most recent weeks and months of your walk with him?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when something bad happens, I'm tempted to ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" Help me remember what you told your disciples, and to trust your healing light and love even when I'm hurting. Amen.

Thursday, December 28

Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Observation: You can't hide a city that is sitting on top of a hill. Its light in night can be seen for miles around. Likewise, if we live for Christ, we will be that light to world. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) but he also said here, "You are the light of the world."

Application: If we live in the light of Christ, it means not being quiet when we should speak, caring for others, sharing the love of Christ with a hurt and broken world.

Prayer: Loving God, I want to live in the light. I cannot give into this darkness, fear, hate or any other way that the darkness creeps into my life. I want to be a torchbearer for Christ for all the world to see. Amen.

Friday, December 29

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Observation: We're used to seeing dignified, noble shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, most people looked down on shepherds. Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't carefully observe all the rituals it took to be "holy." But God loved them, and made these shepherds the first to hear the "wonderful joyous news for all people."

Application: In verses 9-10, the shepherds were terrified, and the angel told them, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you." Have you ever felt fear when you faced something

unexpected or unexplainable? In what parts of your life do you need to hear anew the wonderful, joyous news of Jesus, and to take in the message “Don’t be afraid”?

Prayer: Lord, by my world’s standards, it was odd that you’d declare the good news first to shepherds. But you chose well—the shepherds listened, and worshipped. This Christmas day I join the shepherds in worshipping you. Amen.

Saturday, December 30

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Observation: Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John’s gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw “the Word” (Greek *logos*) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified “*the logos*” as the world’s guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking (cf. Psalm 33:6), and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said “Wisdom” was with God at creation. Yes, said John—coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus—cf. John 1:14) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

Application: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light” (verse 5). God did not shun our darkened world, but came to live here—and in this world, Jesus’ life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. Have there been times when it seemed that darkness was trying to put out God’s light in your life? What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God’s light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

Prayer: God of life and light, I begin this new year in hope—hope that I will find the light and life that Jesus offers me. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.