

“The Light Shines in the Darkness”

(The Gospel of John, Part 2)

John 1.2-5

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We started the Gospel of John last week, but we didn't get very far. One verse, in fact. One of my sons told me later that if I kept up at that rate it would take us 17 years to reach the end!

The prologue to John's gospel is so incredibly majestic. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1.1) As I explained last week, in this one short sentence, John reveals that Jesus Christ was in a uniquely special relationship with God before the beginning of time. He was the divine *logos*, the eternal Word, what the Greeks called *reason* and what the Jews called *wisdom*. He was also *God*, separate from the Father and yet the same as the Father, in the holy mystery we call the Trinity. Just to make sure there is no misunderstanding, John restates it in verse 2: “He was in the beginning with God.” Yes, the Word existed *in the beginning, with God*, before God began *any* of his marvelous acts of creation. There's that word “with” again, that – like in verse 1 – means more than just “with.” Jesus is *turned toward* God, *in the presence of* God. A mystic communion.

The next verse magnifies Christ's role in creation: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” The implications of this statement are once again huge. “All things came into being” through the Word. We need to read Genesis 1 all over again. The first words God spoke, God's first act of creation, “Let there be light” – *Jesus was right there*. God created the light *through* Jesus Christ. The heavens and the earth, same thing – God created the heavens and the earth *through* Jesus Christ. The sun, the stars, the planets – God created all this majestic universe *through* Jesus Christ. Mountains, forests, swamps, islands, and plains; rock formations and coral reefs; Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon; that glorious sunrise and that magnificent sunset – it was all created *through* Jesus Christ. Every tree, every plant, every flower; all the diverse creatures in the sea and in the sky and on the land – they were all created *through* Jesus Christ. Your dog, your cat, your horses and cows, your goldfish and guinea pigs – all created *through* Jesus Christ. Every human on the face of this planet, from Olympic athletes to Syrian refugees, on every continent, of every race, both men and women, you and I – we were *all* created through Jesus Christ. “Without him not one thing came into being.” Christ's life-giving spirit has touched *everything*! He helped birth *all* that is alive, throughout *all* of God's majestic creation. No exceptions! There is *nothing* that exists that Jesus did *not* help create – and that includes all those people who know nothing of him, or who have rejected him. You can turn

your back on your parents, but they're still your parents. You can turn your back on Jesus, but he will he will *always* be the one through whom you came into being. Nothing you can do will *ever* change that!

After those preliminary statements, John introduces two key words that will be primary themes throughout his whole gospel. The first is *life*: "What has come into being in him was *life*." (John 1.3) *Life!* In all its glorious fullness! The life that we have comes to us as a precious gift from Jesus Christ. But there are two different kinds of life. The first is simple *existence*. Anything that has breath is *alive* in that first sense. All those things that came into being through Jesus Christ already have *life* in that first sense of the word. But what John is going to get at, again and again through his gospel, is that there is *another* kind of Life, a *second* kind of Life, that is, if you will, *optional*. Not everybody has this second kind of Life; not everybody *wants* this second kind of Life, which is terribly unfortunate. People truly do not realize what they are missing. John tells us, near the end of his gospel, that the reason why he wrote it was because he wanted to help bring this second kind of Life to more people: "These things are written," he says, "so that you will believe Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have *life* in his name." (John 20.31) He wrote his gospel to help people who are *alive* in the first sense of the word, but not in the second. In chapter 5, Jesus laments that those who reject him are robbing themselves of that second kind of Life (John 5.40). In chapter 10, he says that he came so that people "may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10.10). In chapter 3, John tells us that "whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3.36). As we make our way through the gospel, we will encounter the noun "life" or the verb "live" more than fifty times. I will have more to say about these words in the weeks to come, but let me state here at the outset that he's not just talking about *life after death*. He's talking about a kind of Life that is available to us *here and now*, in our *daily existence on this earth*, and it is available to us *only* through Jesus Christ. John will invite us deeper into this Life as we read his gospel.

The second key word that John introduces here in verse 4 is *light*. "What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the *light* of all people." There is a connection between *life* and *light*. The first thing God created was *light*, and God created light through the Word, through Jesus Christ. Yet at the same time light *is* Jesus. "I am the light of the world!" Jesus tells us in John 8.12. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8.12) We all know the difference between light and dark. In these December weeks leading up to the winter solstice, it gets *really dark* in the evenings *really early*, and we need light to be able to see where we're going. Without light, we'd get disoriented, we'd run into things, we'd trip and maybe fall. We need light in our lives to be able to see – and in John's gospel, that statement is not just *factually* true, it is *metaphorically* true as well. Most everything in John's gospel operates on two levels at the same time – the *plain* sense, and the *spiritual* sense. There's *life* (existence) and then there's *Life* (eternal life, the kind that Jesus offers). There's *light* (the sun, the stars, candlelight, fire, light bulbs), and then there's *Light* (Jesus Christ, the light of the world). We need light in our lives to be able to see. For John, what that means is, we need *Jesus* in our lives to be able to see. To see what? To see the deep spiritual truths of the universe. To see our lives as God truly sees them. To see the fullness of the *gifts* that Jesus offers us. There is no *light* that offers *Life* (the second kind of life) other than the *Light* that came down from heaven: Jesus Christ. This Light is available to all people, everywhere – that's why John says "the life was the light of all people." He's not saying that everyone already has this Light operating in their lives; the

rest of the gospel makes that abundantly clear. You can go through your whole life and not be illuminated by the Light of the world. You can spend years going to church and not be living your life illuminated by this Light. In Jesus' day, it was some of the most religious people who were the least illuminated by the Light of the world. It's easy to get sucked into a kind of *religiosity* that is devoid of the *life* that the Light of the world has to offer. But the Light truly is available to all people, everywhere. John wrote his gospel specifically so that more people could experience true *Light* and true *Life*.

When we get to the fifth verse, we realize just how much is at stake: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1.5) There is *darkness* in this universe. There is no indication anywhere in the Bible that God created the darkness. We are told in Genesis that in the beginning, "darkness covered the face of the deep" (Genesis 1.2), until God penetrated that darkness with the creation of light. John could have just said, "The light shines in the darkness," and left it at that. That would have been true enough. But he didn't stop there; he added that second clause: "the darkness did not overcome it." That means the darkness *tried* to overcome it, and *failed*. Some translations (RSV, NIV, ESV, and NAB) say that "the darkness *has* not overcome it," suggesting that the darkness has tried *again and again* to overcome the light, and *continues* to try, and *still* has not succeeded. There are legitimate grounds for translating it either way, but whichever way you go, the implication is clear: *the darkness has a will of its own*, separate and apart from the Light. It is not just the *opposite* of light; it is *opposed* to the light. It is, as becomes clear later on, a *malevolent force*. It wants to destroy the Light of the world. Satan is only mentioned once by name in the entire gospel, but it's at a pivotally important moment: at the Last Supper, when he "enters into" Judas (John 13.27), and Judas heads out so he can betray Jesus. John then tells us, "and it was night." *Darkness* had descended, both literally and metaphorically, into the world. Darkness thought it could extinguish the Light. *Thank God ... it couldn't*. The Light is *always* stronger than the darkness. *Always*.

These opening verses set the stage. There is *Life*, which has come into being through Jesus Christ, and the *Life* is the *Light* of *all* people. But there is also *darkness*. Opposition. A willful desire to *extinguish* the Light. There's something going on, under the surface of John's gospel, a war of cosmic proportions – a war that has *already been won*, in the eternal realm, when Jesus Christ defeated death, ascended into heaven, and took his place on his heavenly throne – though here, in the earthly realm, in the boundaries of time, the war still goes on. Darkness tries to invade *our* lives. Darkness keeps thinking it can beat us. But something can beat the darkness. Something *has* beaten the darkness, once and for all. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not and *will not ever* overcome the Light.

On Christmas Eve, when we dim the lights and we take the light from the Christ candle and we spread it, candle by candle, throughout this sanctuary, we're not doing it because it's pretty, or because we're feeling sentimental. We're doing it because *the Light shines in the darkness*. We're doing it to reaffirm our belief that there *is* a Light of the World, a Light that shines even in the darkest darkness. We're doing it to say that no matter what may come in this life, no matter how dark things may feel at times, no matter how often we have strayed or how far we have fallen, *we choose the Light*. We choose the Light of Jesus Christ, and the *Life* that he offers us. For in that Light is the *Life* that's worth living.

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