1/18-19/20 The Light of the World Rev. Amy Haines

John 1:1-18

When I used to drive through the rural flatland of northwest Ohio at night, I was always amazed at how much light I could see in the darkness. Every farmhouse or new home built in the country had a bright outdoor pole light in order to see the driveway and the back door. One could also easily tell the direction of the larger cities, such as Findlay or Bowling Green,

as their light pollution emitted a muted glow in the skies.

When the power went out, however, dark was dark. Ken would become one of those curiosity seekers driving around in the dark, amazed at how different downtown would look with no street lamps lit and no businesses opened. House after house would appear dark, as if no one was home—until he came upon that house with a generator. Then light would blaze from the windows, a surprising, welcoming light in the darkness.

Have you ever been caught off guard by sudden darkness? You’re walking across the room and suddenly cannot see what is two steps in front of you. You stumble around first to hold on to something solid, then to look for a flashlight or a candle. Thank goodness nowadays most of us have our cell phones handy, with built-in flashlight apps! A light in that moment is most welcoming, to guide us where we need to go.

Today, we may be better protected from sudden electrical power outages. But what happens when the storm is within us, and the darkness of doubt and fear and struggle threaten to overwhelm any hope and health and happiness in our lives?

We are not the first to struggle against darkness. In every generation, there has been war and rumor of war. In every generation, there has been those who exploit and abuse others. In every generation, there is something or someone that threatens to overwhelm with despair and darkness. In every generation, there are those who question if God exists, or if God exists, if God cares. We are not the first to be surrounded by darkness.

We are also not the first to be offered hope and promise and reassurance that, yes, indeed, God exists, and yes, indeed, God cares. God’s light has not been extinguished. God’s love is still for all people.

Thankfully that is one of the overarching themes of the Bible- God’s ongoing care for God’s people.

In the beginning of the story of Genesis, in the beginning of the story of creation, God brought order out of chaos, created light to shine in the darkness, and created humanity in God’s own image, calling all of creation good.

Through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, God claimed the people of Israel as God’s people. And even when God’s people turned away to other gods, God still cared for them.

Even when God’s people yearned for their selfish desires to be fulfilled, ignoring God’s greater ways for humanity, God still cared for them. Even when God’s people suffered the consequences of sin, God still offered a word of hope and forgiveness after the exodus and the exile.

God’s people clung to God’s promises, even when God was silent for over 400 years. The light of God may have been dimly flickering at that time, yet it never burnt out. Faith was still alive.

And while our faith ancestors yearned for a word from the Lord, they never gave up hope.

Then John was born, a miracle in Elizabeth and Zechariah’s old age. Then Jesus was born of Mary before she and Joseph were married. These births were announced by angels, and ushered in a new era of God’s light shining in the darkness.

When John grew up and called the people of Israel to a baptism of repentance, he witnessed to the light who was to follow him, again offering a word of hope. He anticipated that God was about to be present in their midst in a new way. And that light, that hope, that Word, is none other than Jesus.

Today, our Scripture is The Gospel of John’s version of the Christmas story. Yes, there are no shepherds, no angels, not even a baby in a manger. Instead there is a proclamation of Light in the darkness. Instead there is an affirmation of the Word become flesh.

Have you ever received a knock on the door and suddenly found yourself face to face with the UPS man delivering an unexpected package? Special delivery! How exciting to see what wonderful gift you have received, and from whom! Sometimes that unexpected knock on the door is an even greater surprise than any of the packages under the tree on Christmas morning.

Today, God is knocking on the door of our hearts. Today, our Scripture surprises us with the good news of God’s special delivery to the world! Jesus is God’s Son, God’s very self, come in flesh and blood to our world.

God did not come from the greatness of heaven into the splendor of kingly palaces and royal robes. God did not come with trumpets and angels to overpower the world into believing in Him. Instead, God came in the frailty and utter dependency of a newborn baby to a humble, ordinary, peasant couple, born in a borrowed stable while a visitor in Bethlehem. God put on frail flesh and blood and bone that is prone to scrapes and cuts and bruises. God put on a human body that can suffer hurt and sorrow and pain.

Why did God give us such a special delivery as his very own self in the frailty of human flesh and blood? God did it to offer us the gift of his abiding presence, to offer us the gift of eternal life,

to offer us a way to get to know our great and glorious God intimately. God’s gift was not only for the Jews of the first century; God’s gift is for all people for all generations!

Rev. Charles Hoffacker reminds us:

“It is this dependency, this helplessness, this utter frailty and utter identification with our lowliness that enables the eternal Word to do something new, something otherwise impossible.

It is when the Word becomes frail flesh and lives inside the reach of human touch that we finally encounter, face to face, the glory of the Word. Jesus comes among us, the Word made flesh, and the glory shines through human life and human death and human resurrection. In Jesus, this glory shines out in a way that does not blind or destroy us, frail flesh though we are.

But the glory does change us. The new light of the incarnate Word sets our hearts on fire,

not to destroy us, but so that the light may blaze forth in our lives. This light we know as love.

It is the light Christ was born to bring.

--The Very Rev. Charles Hoffacker, episcopalchurch.org

The good news of Christmas is the good news of God with us. Yet this good news is for every day of our lives, not just one day or one season of the church year.

We can give thanks every day for God’s gift of Incarnation, of God in the flesh in God’s own Son Jesus. Jesus is God’s special delivery to the world. Jesus is our way to know God and be known by God. Jesus makes our great God visible to us in an understandable way. Jesus is God offering a new way through the darkness, a way toward redemption and grace, a way toward hope and peace, a way toward light and life.

..If I were to tell you that a particular structure is made up of 18,038 individual iron parts,

weighs 10,000 tons, needs to be repainted every five years with 50 tons of paint, and stands over 1,000 feet tall, would you know what structure I was talking about?

If I showed you a picture of the structure, known in Paris as the Eiffel Tower, would that picture help you better understand the facts I just stated?

Over the years God has given God’s people many facts about himself, but no one really understood God until God sent Jesus as His flesh and blood self, a clear picture of God’s grace and truth and love. Jesus gives us a clearer picture of who God is and who God calls us to be.

 -Homiletics 1-5-03, adapted from children’s sermon

The hope of the incarnation is that when we are lost is darkness, buried under sin with seemingly no way out, God shines a light into our darkness, offering us forgiveness, grace and love. That light is Jesus, reminding us that God still seeks us, and sin and death do not have to have the final say. We are never too far lost to sin that God does not still love us and seek to redeem us.

Israel thought they may have been forgotten by God. They put their trust in the Law as the ways of God. Yet Jesus came to remind us the Law was to assist us in our relationships with God and others, not to replace our relationships with rules. Jesus came to restore God to us and us to God. Through love and truth and grace.

Kathleen Norris shares a story about God’s light and hope shining in the darkness

in her book titled *Amazing Grace*. She writes,

“One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face,

no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven.

And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt [as] awestruck [as Jacob,] because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation.

And, as Psalm 139 puts it, darkness is as nothing to God, who can look right through whatever evil we’ve done in our lives to the creature made in the divine image. …

God loves to look at us, and loves it when we will look back at him. …

God will find a way to let us know that he is with us in this place, wherever we are, however far we’ve think we’ve run.”

“Even in terrible circumstances and calamities, in matters of life and death, if I sense that I am in the shadow of God, I find light, so much light that my vision improves dramatically.

I know that holiness is near.”

 -Kathleen Norris in *Amazing Grace*, p. 150, p.30

That is the hope of incarnation, to remember that God still delights to see our face and to hear our worship even when he has brought us out of the darkness of sin by the light of his love.

That is the hope of incarnation, Jesus coming into our world as God’s light leading the way back home to God.

I love the way Eugene Petersons translated verse 14:

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish. (MSG)

The CEB translation reminds us:

The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (CEB)

This is good news! Whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves, God is with us. We glimpse the Father through the Son. God has made God’s home with us. God in Christ has moved into the neighborhood.

Think about the last time you moved into a new neighborhood—did you wonder who would be watching or who would be waiting, what neighbors would accept you and what neighbors would reject you?

20 years ago, when I moved into the parsonage in Payne, I was greeted by a welcoming committee of about 15-20 people making themselves at home on the bare carpet, eating lunch,

waiting for my arrival. They were excited to greet me and to help me.

10 years later, when we arrived to the parsonage in Deshler, I found the house unlocked, the garage door open, and no one around. They were expecting my arrival, but no one was actively waiting on my arrival.

Have you ever come home from work one day, to find a moving truck at your neighbor’s house?

Did you greet them, or ignore them? If they were different from you in any way, were you ready to welcome them or ready to reject them?

When Jesus moved into the neighborhood of our world, he was coming as God’s gift of grace and God’s offer of love. Yet how many missed his coming? How many refused to welcome him? And how many who initially welcomed him later turned against him, because he did not conform to who they expected him to be?

John reminds us:

The light came to his own people, and his own people didn’t welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God’s children.

(11-12 CEB)

God came to our world through Jesus whether we wanted God to come or not.

God comes to our lives through Jesus whether we are ready or not.

We each have a choice, just like the shepherds, just like the Magi, even just like Herod—

will we welcome Emmanuel, God with us, or will we reject God’s Son because he calls us to live by the light and love of God, and that light and love will change us?

Will we claim our place as God’s beloved, and live into the identity offered us at our baptisms?

Will we allow God to shine the redeeming light of love and grace, truth and redemption,

into the dark corners of our lives, then allow that light to shine forth from our lives, our faith, our love to the world around us?

Right now, if we are honest, the followers of Jesus are known more for the darkness we spread

than the light we shine. We are known more for the ways we reject others than the ways we welcome others. We may know the light and love of Jesus in our lives, yet we are fearful of sharing our stories of redeeming grace with others. God needs us to not only believe and receive light and love, but also to live and share hope and grace.

..The writer Robert Fulgham tells the story of one of his professors, a man named Alexander Papaderos,  who once taught Fulgham a two-week course on Greek culture.  Towards the end of the last session, his teacher opened the floor for questions. Fulgham boldly asked,

“Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

After a few moments Papaderos pulled his wallet from his pocket, removed a tiny, quarter-sized mirror, and replied:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and lived in a remote village.

One day, on the road, I found the broken piece of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine-in deep holes and crevices and dark closets.

It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light--truth, understanding, knowledge--is there,

and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.”

*- taken from Robert Fulgham, It was on Fire when I Lay it Down*

-thepastorsworkshop.com:light

When we say yes to claiming our identities as God’s beloved children, when we say yes to believing in Jesus, when we say yes to God’s light and love, God’s grace and truth in our lives,

we are called to allow the light of Christ to shine in and through and among us.

 “One Sunday on their way home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said,

‘Mommy, the preacher’s sermon this morning confused me.’ The mother said, ‘Oh? Why is that?’ The little girl replied, ‘Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?’ The mother replied, ‘Yes, that’s true, honey.’ ‘And he also said that God lives in us? Is that true, Mommy?’ Again the mother replied, ‘Yes.’ ‘Well,’ said the little girl, ‘if God is bigger than us and he lives in us, wouldn’t he show through?’ “

 -Illustrations Unlimited, p. 303

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.” (5 CEB)

Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the word become flesh. Jesus is our Savior and Lord.

May we choose this day to believe in Jesus. May we choose this day to follow Jesus. May we choose this day to become children of the light. May we choose this day to allow God’s light to shine through us.

Let us pray.