

*"The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."*

*John 1*

Which is easy for you and me to say this morning -- drenched, as we are, in more incandescent light than we can possibly use -- allowing us, with little or no trouble -- to find our pews, read our bulletins, and see our priest -- (which may, or may not be a good thing)

It is a light we have cleverly harnessed to view our beautiful stained glass windows by day -- and a light we've drummed up, and occasionally plug in, to allow passing drivers to see our beautiful stained glass windows by night!

We take for granted things like streetlights, headlights and porch lights -- which guide us safely home with such mundane ease that we only notice them when they're out.

In case of emergencies, the more organized among us know where to find the flashlights! -- although we might admit that we usually only reach for them to check and change the batteries.

Who needs to worry about the dark when we have all this light?

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But of course it never used to be this way-

We all know we dwell in a sliver of time, compared to the rest of history,

So we "moderns" have a very unorthodox view of light and darkness compared with the vast majority of humanity who lived in those pre-Edisonian days. -- We live in the midst of amazing technological advances that can give us day at night with the flick of a switch.

So you and I have much different understandings of the cloak of night and the truth of day than our foremothers and forefathers -- And we really don't have to go too far back in time to remember a very different scenario.

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[Ushers, turn down the lights]

Chris on organ?]

"It used to be, when it got dark, people felt edgy" -- says Virginia historian Roger Ekirch.

He studies the time period between 1500 and the 1830's -- in Europe and America -- More specifically, he studies the dark -- He studies the night!

He reminds us that this was a time when people relied on torches, hearth fires, smoking candles and walnut oil -- People would talk about being overtaken by the night -- Shut in -- Covered -- Night meant fear!

Fear of demons -- Fear of witches and night-hags.

*"Light of the World"*

Christmas I, Sunday, December 30, 2007

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An incubus or succubus might waft into your bed.

In one English parish, out of 52 premature deaths from 1650 to 1663, -- Four people were frightened to death by fairies -- One person was led into a horse pond by a will of the wisp. -- And Seven people were bewitched-

And you and I thought this was just a silly TV show! -- [dink-a-dink-a-dink]

Oh no, dear ones, these were evil spells that blossomed in the darkness -- cast by witches and cursed by all those upon whom they fell!

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The pre-industrial night was a far cry from what you and I call night.

In fact, in many circles, it wasn't called night at all -- it was not a time of day -- it was referred to as a season -- as separate from day as a northern winter from summertime.

At night, laws blurred - rules shifted.

Night's darkness loomed so large in their consciousness that our ancestors evolved an entire vocabulary to describe its manifestations.

"Sun suckers" were rays of the setting sun. -- A dark sky was said to be "lowry."

In Ireland, the hour when a person became indistinguishable from a bush was termed "day dapple."

Each phase of the night had its name -- Candle light -- Dead of Night -- First Cock Crow and Second Cock Crow.

Moonlight was known as "the parish lantern" -- for these were the headlights most night travelers relied upon.

Of course, if you were a robber, who depended on darkness for cover, you called the moon "the tattler." -- Such thieves were called "moon cursers" -- And used the cover of darkness to poach, smuggle, pilfer, rob orchards, steal lumber, and cut down trees.

And of course, dark nights meant more accidents. -- People fell into ditches, ponds and rivers -- They fell off bridges and were thrown by horses, who had a hard time seeing their way -- And then, as now, alcohol improved your odds of ending up in a ditch -- as night time is, and always has been, the right time for a drink or two or three...

To get around, people memorized their local terrain -- roads, fences, cisterns and bogs.

They refrained from whistling in the dark-- for fear of summoning up the devil.

Instead, they wore charms or amulets around their necks -- and nailed horse shoes to their homes to fend off the witches.

For these folk, there was a fear of the reality of darkness -- that night literally fell.

To protect themselves, sleepers wore nightcaps. -- Bed curtains fended off miasmal drafts.

One well-known 17<sup>th</sup> century writer famously tied his hands inside his bed at night for fear they would flop outside the curtains and expose him to night air.

*“Light of the World”*

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Such was the fear of night. -- Such was the fear of darkness. -- Such was the fear of the unseen and hence the uncontrollable.

And such fear is why the light of Christ came into the world.

[Ushers, you may raise the lights]

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“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

These are the sublime words of St. John that we Episcopalians hear every year in Christmastide -- during the 12 days of Christmas light when Jesus is nicely tucked into his Manger -- (don't we all wish newborns rested as quietly and peacefully as porcelain ones do?)

Mother Church believes Jesus' light is thus on display and streaming out into all the world -- a world sorely in need of illumination.

And while actual darkness can be scary -- not just to folk living in the pre-industrial age - - you and I suspect that the light of Christ coming into the world is a bit more profound than this.

We suspect that this light coming into the world is no longer found simply inside a little baby at Christmas -- but that a fractal of that light is now found somewhere else.

St. John will go on to elaborate later in his Gospel -- telling all who believe in Christ that, “YOU are the light of the world.”

For this is how this light shines out from this manger -- it goes forth in the hearts and minds and words and deeds of all who follow.

The light goes forth in us.

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Suppose we take an average neighborhood street.

In one house are a husband and wife who work in middle management. -- They have 2.2 kids -- which census-takers insist exist, but I have yet to see -- and this family is rather wrapped up in making money, taking vacations and driving a new car every two years -- don't worry, they always choose domestics.

Next door, lives a Buddhist who lives a quiet existence, doesn't talk much but respects his neighbors.

Next door to him is a drug addict, who lives a drug addict's lifestyle. -- Barely keeping down a job, she stays up too late, and, although she's tried, she has been unable to kick the habit.

And next door to her lives a couple from Ohio. -- I don't need to say anything more about them.

Then, one day, the drug addict goes to church with a friend. -- In a matter of months she embraces Christianity. -- Soon she is baptized, and makes new friends in her new community. -- She enrolls in yet another 10-step program, and is somehow, given her newfound strength -- able to stay clean. -- With the help of her new friends, she is now on the wagon longer than she has ever been.

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As time goes by the neighbors notice a difference. -- She no longer disturbs the neighbors with her loud music and late-night parties. -- Her yard is much cleaner -- In fact, on snowy days she has even shoveled her neighbor's sidewalks.

If you were to ask this new Christian about her life today, she would tell you it is hard -- but she would also tell you it is much better than it used to be. -- She would tell you that Christianity has greatly improved her life.

If you were to ask the neighbors about this woman's life today, -- they would say the same thing. -- They would tell you that they noticed a difference -- And that the difference has not only made her life better -- But it has made the whole neighborhood better. (Rob Bell)

The light of Christ goes out into all the world not through some cosmic, new-age, metaphysical ray gun -- But through the lives and works and deeds of ordinary people like you and me.

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More than any other Gospel writer, St. John uses this image of light.

In fact, John mentions light 21 times in his Gospel.

In one memorable passage John tells us that the light of Jesus that dwells in us all should not be kept under a bushel basket -- but it should be allowed to shine.

Which, he seems to suggest, is not something that just automatically happens.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas a Kempis wrote this:

“If we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness... ; “...let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ.”

Light begets light.

And a Kempis seems to be suggesting the same thing St. John does -- that to allow the light of Christ which dwells in each one of us to shine -- takes some intentional work on our parts to allow to happen.

For all around us there are forces diligently at work trying to keep the bushel basket covering up the light. -- The distractions, diversions and detours of everyday life are legion -- and it is so easy to get off track -- it is so easy to cocoon into our own little lives!

For Christ's message to us is so simple!

The first commandment in the Bible is to love God with all our heart, soul and strength.

Jesus taught us that the best way we can love God is by loving our neighbor -- especially our neighbors who are less fortunate.

So if our chief goal in life is to love God.

If obeying the first commandment is something we really want to do -- then our number one purpose in life can be demonstrated by loving our neighbor. --letting the light of Christ shine through us

How might we allow this to happen more consistently in the week ahead?

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Living intentional lives of light is essentially a question of identity. -- It's about self-image.

Who do we want to be known as? -- The wise sage? -- The doting parent or grandparent? -- Do we want to be known for the way we dress? -- Do we want to be known for the way we live? -- Do we want to be known for our cleverness? -- Do we want to be the ones who define ourselves?

Or are we willing to allow Christ to define us -- to continually define us?

Archbishop Rowan Williams writes this:

    "Christian identity is to belong in a place that Jesus defines for us.

    "By living in that place we come, in some degree, to share his identity -- "to bear His name and to be in the same relationships He has with God and with the world."

My friends, we are the light of the world. -- And the light shines in the darkness -- and the darkness does not overcome it.

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Our journey is not dissimilar to that of the geese on our bulletin cover -- if you have it handy, you might want to pick it up -- It's a rather famous print by the contemporary Dutch graphic artist MC Escher

It helps us put into perspective this image of darkness and light -- and the mission ahead of us in the upcoming week and year.

Take a look at the white geese -- the bearers of light

They are moving from left to right -- that's how we read, left to right, -- it is a direction of progress -- And that progress calls us to be agents of light in a dark world.

This image asks us profound questions about our lives in the year ahead -- If any of us read the Free Press this week we saw that we are in a State that lost 30,500 people last year -- second only to Rhode Island -- Everyone in Michigan is flying into a metaphorical darkness -- into a bleak future.

In fact, each one of us can name even more personal areas of uncertainty, fear and worry that the future holds -- no matter what part of the world one might live in.

Yet, we fly into this darkness not as dark souls -- but as a people of light -- We fly forward with the light of Christ -- a light that overcomes the darkness -- a light that has and will vanquish all darkness and redeem the world.

So if we are agents and bearers of light, -- what gifts of hope, optimism, courage and good cheer might we bring?

How do we bring the light into this dark world, personally and as a St. David's community?

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In addition to reminding us of the light each one of us bears --this print also makes another profound statement -- that we fly off into the future together -- as a St. David's community.

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Like a flock of geese -- with all our flapping and yapping and honking -- and don't worry, I will not name names...-I will not call out you flappers and yappers and honkers –

We, too, as a faith community, bound and determined to change our community for Christ -- we too go into the darkness of an uncertain future reminding each other that we are bearers of Christ's light -- we have the light of Christ inside us -- we are His ambassadors -- we are His peacemakers -- we are His agents of reconciliation and courage in a very scared and angry world.

For we need each other to do this -- that's why Christ called and created the Church -- to encourage us and the world to do what we're called to do.

For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

***Amen.***

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Lessons:

Isaiah 61:10-62:3,  
Psalm 147:13-21,  
Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7,  
John 1:1-18

Resources:

Details regarding pre-industrial living conditions according to historian Roger Ekirch is from a 1990's Smithsonian Magazine article by Joyce and Richard Wolkomir entitled “When bandogs howle and spirits walk,”