

Christmas is often called the Season of Light. Yet for those people who live in Alaska or in Scandinavian countries near the Arctic Circle, this time of year is perpetual night. It is no accident, or coincidence, that we celebrate Christ's birthday at the darkest time of the year. The assigned date of Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup>, was set by the Roman Church in 336 CE. This date worked for the Romans because it had long been observed by pagan Rome as the "birth of the unconquered Sun." It was close to the winter solstice and celebrated the return of the sun after the longest night of the year on December 21<sup>st</sup>.

I am sure that most of us would agree that the Christmas season brings light into our dark world. We seek to penetrate that darkness by putting up Christmas lights, by decorating our homes in bright and festive colors, and by throwing parties for our friends and families. We light our advent candles, listen to our Christmas music, watch our favorite Holiday movies, take pictures with Santa, and stroll through our neighborhoods gazing at all of the beautiful Christmas lights in hopes of cheering ourselves up during a time when it seems that we need light the most. In fact if we look at light's true nature we see that its purpose is to shine and dispel darkness.

Yet what is considered to be a happy occasion, anticipated and celebrated with delight by many of us, is approached with sheer dread by others. Psychologists tell us that numerous people experience deep depression during the holiday season. So...while this Christmas may have been a time of rejoicing and light for some, for others it is has possibly been a time of mourning and darkness.

In spite of all the Christmas and New years' revelry, after all of the parties and celebrations, this Sunday morning may seem very dark indeed. Here between Christ's first coming and the next – His coming again –it is possible to lose heart, to become cynical, to allow mourning, sadness, and a "faint spirit" to overwhelm us. We yearn for a release from our present circumstances. We dare to dream of

better days. We want the hurting to be over. We seek a reason to be cheerful and happy! So we wait amid the clamor of a world all too willing to throw a Christmas party, and we do our best to join in with those celebrating. Even if only to forget for a moment how painful life can sometimes be.

Yet the community of faith that we call the church, knows how to address this pain we may be experiencing. We remember that in spite of the present trouble that the Lord of light and life promises to bring our sorrow to an end. And so this community of hurt becomes profoundly a community of hope.

One of my favorite authors, a man named Henri Nowen once wrote about a profound experience he had during Christmas one year. “His story begins with him talking about a special day when he couldn’t stop thinking about the Christmas scene that was arranged under the altar at his Church. The nativity consisted of three small wood-carved figures made in India: a poor woman, a poor man, and a small child between them. The carving was simple, nearly primitive. No eyes, no ears, no mouths, just the contours of the faces. The figures were smaller than a human hand –nearly too small to attract attention at all. But then –a beam of light shines on the three figures and projects large shadows on the wall of the sanctuary. That says it all.

The light thrown on the smallness of Mary, Joseph, and their Child projected them as large, hopeful shadows against the walls of our life and our world. While looking at the intimate scene you could already see the first outlines of the majesty and glory they represented. While witnessing the most human of human events.

Henri Nowen proclaimed in his story, “I see the majesty of God appearing on the horizon of my existence. While being moved by the gentleness of these three people, I am already awed by the immense greatness of God’s love appearing in my world. Without the radiant beam of light shining into the darkness there is little to be seen.

It might be pretty easy to pass by these three simple people and continue to walk in darkness. But everything changes with the light. The light makes all things new; and reveals the greatness hidden in the small event of that Holy Night. I pray that we will have the strength to keep the light alive in our hearts so that we can see and point to the promising shadows appearing on the wall of our world.”

A babe born in Bethlehem is the reason for our hope. It is not mere wishful thinking, or a positive mental attitude. In many cases it is hope against hope, a hope that at times seems unfounded. A hope that is grounded in the promises of God. It is a hope expressed by a poor mother in a barrio in Mexico City. In spite of losing four of her six children to starvation, she proclaims, “This present world is not what God had in mind. God is not finished yet. He will break it down and rebuild it in Jesus. My hope is in Jesus.”

During the past few weeks we have heard scripture promises declared to us that when all is said and done, God will reign –in our lives and in our world. We know that in the coming of the Christ-child, God has kept his promise. And we believe there are more promises yet to be fulfilled.

Today’s Gospel message is rather different from the typical Christmas story that we are used to hearing. If we were to read the first few chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, for example, we would encounter a genealogy of Jesus tracing his lineage back to David and Abraham. Eventually we would come across events that we are all too familiar with ....an angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph in a dream, a virgin Mary giving birth to a son and naming him Emmanuel, a jealous and fearful King Herod sending the wise men to find the child he thought could be the future ruler of Israel. Luke’s gospel story seems even more familiar to us. After we skim over his dedication to Theophilus (Thee-ahh-fil-us), we read in greater detail about: Mary receiving a visit from the angel Gabriel, the Emperor Augustus establishing a decree of registration, shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by

night, and of course a special child being born, wrapped in bands of cloth, and then laid in a manger.

The author of John, however, begins his Gospel a bit differently than the others. Instead of focusing on Jesus, and his human birth, the author instead relates Jesus to the Word of God. We read that Jesus is the Word of God. “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God! He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

So what does this mean for us today? Well when we look at the creation story in Genesis we see that it was through Jesus that we were first given life. God spoke the words, “Let there be light, and there was light.” Through the word, through Jesus, God created the heavens and the earth. In John’s story we do not read about the humanity of Jesus, but rather about his godliness. The author describes Jesus as the word, and yet also calls Jesus the True light, which enlightens everyone. Jesus is the light that the darkness can not overcome.

John’s “Christmas” would be difficult to do in a children’s program. There is no baby lying in a manger. There are no parents traveling to Bethlehem. There are no angels or shepherds. There is no star or magi. John doesn’t give us much of a historical account of Christmas, instead he gives us a confession of faith about the incarnation of God. He isn’t so concerned about exactly what happened in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus. John is much more concerned about the proper beliefs about Jesus now.

I wonder if we have become too accustomed to the story of Jesus’ birth, causing us to lose, or miss out, on the original shock of the idea of the birth itself. God is made manifest in Jesus, in a human form, which meant that God took on mortality and would experience real human suffering and death. Not only that, but God, through Jesus, subjects (himself) to earthly lowliness.

There were a few early church theologians who had trouble believing that God was in the form of a baby, who needed to be breastfed, and had to have his diapers changed. What they didn't fully appreciate is the fact that God was willing to become so vulnerable-mortal, small, weak, laid in a trough where cows fed-in order to redeem us. This language of relating Christ's passion to his birth can be found in many places: in "Hark The Herald Angels Sing," there is the line, "God and sinners reconciled," "What Child Is This" proclaims, "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you," and the (Nicene) Creed affirms, "For us humans and our salvation. . .he was made man."

What seemed dark and grim, so frightening, and disappointing for a young bride and her husband on that first Christmas eve, suddenly became transformed. Here was a new life. God's life. The 9 months of pregnancy, the difficult days of their journey to Bethlehem, even the hours of labor seemed for the moment forgotten. As they gazed into the loving, shining face of the Son of God, as they pondered this miracle of God's perfect love, and as they paused to give thanks in their hearts for the best Christmas present ever given; for Mary and Joseph, the long night of fear and uncertainty was over, and the day had come at last!

Everyone has a Bethlehem. It can be a place of disappointment and despair. Of closed doors at the Inn of Life. Of overcrowded streets where one seems lost and forgotten. It can be a place of discouragement, or a place of hope and joy. Christmas reminds us that Bethlehem is a place where hopes are reborn and possibilities loom large. It reminds us of a God who keeps his promises. Christmas is a time of new life and new beginnings. For it is the One born in the manger that brings light into the dark corners of our lives. The one who can turn our nights of despairing into days of rejoicing.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "If we Christians are joyful, it is not the simple-minded cheerfulness of those who deny the world's hunger and pain, or

who think that somehow ‘it is all for the best.’ Joy is to us a gift, a Christmas gift of a God who is never content to leave us be –but who intrudes, offers, prods, and creates new possibilities. One who even surprises us. Let us revel in the light of that star, beneath which the ordinary becomes holy and the holy ordinary, beneath which it becomes exceedingly clear that there is nothing more we must do or be, to be loved by God.

Sometimes a light surprises our all-too-accustomed darkness, and for the first time in a long time, we see! We see the light of new life and new hope and new possibilities beyond our hurt. And sometimes we may even experience so much of the presence of God, that even in the most difficult circumstances we dare to give thanks because the light of Christ shines in our darkness! Thanks be to God.