

After the Darkness, Light

John 1:6-13

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This Christmas Eve, we turn to the Gospel of John, the first chapter, as we look at verses 6 through 13, for it proclaims the coming of the light. It is after the darkness of the waiting, of the prophesies, of the trials, of the loss and exile, of wondering how the Lord would redeem, how would the Lord fulfill his promises, who would the servant be that we have been teaching on in the prophet Isaiah. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. Hear now God's Word, John 1:6-13.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Come, Holy Spirit. Open our minds and our hearts to wondrous things in your Word, that the power of your Word, that the power of your presence by your Spirit would again renew our hope in the light of Christ. May that light bring new life. May it bring renewal. May it bring encouragement. May it bring hope. In Christ alone, we ask you this humbly. In the power and the majesty that is the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

At 12:30 p.m. last Sunday, December 17th, a black-out happened at the busiest airport in the world. You perhaps heard about this. Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, which sees roughly 275,000 passengers a day, that sees roughly 2,500 arrivals and departures daily, which is the literal hub of the aviation world, went into an inexplicable 11-hour black-out. Over 1,700 flights between Sunday and Monday were canceled. Some relatives of even our own Pastor Mayfield's family were stuck on the tarmac for hours trying to return home, able to see the terminal but not able to get there.

And what happened as the news was reporting about this was showing video of people walking around in darkness. Report of the possibility of power being restored, the reason for the black-out not completely sure, but no one able to do anything. But then, early in the wee hours of Monday morning, the light was restored. And what began to replay around the world and on many news programs were the videos of people's responses. But there was one that continued to play over and over again. I remember it and cannot forget it, because it was—the video was of the food court. And there was a woman sitting with her family. And as the camera is panning to the left, the lights flicker back on, and she began to erupt in absolute, uncontrolled joy. And she was just like, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" And all you could hear was, "Oh!" She was just—you know, finally, light is restored.

I've begun to, of course, reflect on how much we need power. What a blessing light is. It's very hard for us to enter back into the biblical, historical narrative of the metaphorical darkness that was over Israel. The culture had largely crumbled. They were under the oppressive rule of the Romans. And these old promises were read, the promises that the Lord God would send forth a servant to bring redemption and salvation. Now, that redemption and salvation they believed to be national, political, cultural. But, of

course, that redemption and salvation would come, but it would be very different than they had expected. But nonetheless, they knew the promises—that there would be a great light, that the light of God would dawn in the darkness.

And so we enter into the narrative of the promised birth of Christ. And here, well after that birth, as an infant now an adult, yet John the Baptist is witnessing still to the light. And these words which we have written in the Gospel of John is this wonderful promise. And it should call forth from us again, by God's spirit, a rejoicing. A rejoicing that this light has dawned into the darkness of our lives, of our world. And we look to that light for renewal, for redemption, and for salvation. But how are we to understand this light? You'll see in the outline this morning the desire—the promise, rather—the outline is the promise of the light; the coming of the light; and walking in the light.

Because even though the light was coming and had come, it was not greeted with shouts of joy. How do we greet this light? Again, this Christmas season, the light of the Gospel? Well, let's look together. The promise of the light. Verses 6 through 8 declare very clearly—as John the Baptist said, he was witnessing and bearing witness to the light, “that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.” Well, this light that John writes about, that John the Baptist was witnessing to, was an actual person, as we see there—“that all might believe through him.” This light which was being declared is the servant which we have been preaching about in the prophet Isaiah.

In fact, the prophet Isaiah would witness to this. You hear this in the opening chapters of Isaiah. Isaiah 9:1-2. This is what he says. But understand that Isaiah 9 and the proclamation of the promised coming of the light came in the midst of darkness. We know this because of the verse that precedes it. Hear this. Chapter 8, verse 22, “And they will look to the earth but behold distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness.” This was the prophet Isaiah prophesying, saying they hoped for this renewal of Israel, but in fact they will be plunged into a thick darkness. Because what they want is not what the Lord offers. Yet the Lord in his grace gives this promise, Isaiah 9:1:

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Now, why does this matter? It is because it is sometimes lost on us when we read this in Isaiah. But in truth, what is being written here in Hebrew is in the past tense. It's what scholars call a prophetic past. Meaning Isaiah is prophesying about the future, but he's doing so in the past tense. Because he's saying—he's projecting himself into the future. “The light has come.” Meaning it is so certain, the Lord is so faithful to his promise of redemption, that it is as sure as if it has already happened. And so hundreds of years prior to the coming of Christ, Isaiah in his hope, in the midst of darkness, in the midst of discouragement, in the midst of disobedience, in the midst of the world crumbling down around his ears—he's saying, “But the Lord, in the midst of anguish, in the midst of distress, will bring forth the light.”

And now John the Baptist is witnessing to the light. Now, as Pastor Mayfield so eloquently portrayed for us last week, God could, if he so willed, have brought forth his Son in human flesh as an adult. But he did not. He sent him forth as an infant, born, cried, fed, growing up as a young man, learning and walking in the ways of the Lord, and then working hard, then proclaiming the salvation that was to come through him. And yet they would reject. But this was the Lord's way. This was to be the light. Why is that? It is because, it says in verse 8, “He was not the light”—that is, John the Baptist—“but bearing witness about the light.” What is the light about the servant? It's not just that the light is the servant

because Isaiah proclaims it to be. It is because this light would bring salvation. He says this in verse 7, “that all might believe through him.”

This light is the light of salvation. But how so? Is it just merely because of what Jesus proclaims, or because of who he is? We celebrate the incarnation this day and tomorrow. We celebrate the incarnation, why? Because God, if you will, metaphorically is the sun. God the Father is the sun. And Christ, his son, is the radiance of the Father. He is the radiance. He is the light that comes from the sun. Yet he is also of the same essence. We would never say that the light that comes from the sun is separate from that big ball of flame out in the galaxy. It is of the same thing. Christ is the radiance, we hear in Hebrews, as we will go into in 2018. Christ is the radiance of God the Father.

Because this radiance of all that God is took on human flesh. And that human flesh was sanctified. That human flesh walked in obedience. That human flesh walked in the glory of the Father. Therefore, that human flesh was sanctified. That human flesh was given over to the cross because of our sin. That human flesh was laid in the grave. That human flesh was resurrected. The light of God didn't just come to shed forth as a message; it came to shed forth as human life, walking in our midst. For love has walked among us. He has come not to simply proclaim a message of salvation; he is salvation—not just for our minds, not just for our inner spiritual selves, but for our very bodies. The weight of the incarnation is that the redemption of our bodies has already begun.

Dear friends who are suffering physically, may you not lose hope, and may we along with you not lose hope. But the fact is that what ails us will not be the victor. For Christ who is the light, the radiance of God the Father, has come in human flesh and has gone before us, suffered on our behalf, laid in the grave, and raised victorious. So shall we be. It is God's divine, subversive reality that in the midst of our brokenness and hurt and pain, physically, emotionally, relationally, divine subversive says, “Yes, but not that in the end.” It is the Lord's resurrection—that is the light. That is the light that we rejoice in this day. It isn't just the incarnation. It is all that is packed into the incarnation. For the light has come into the world, and that light is the light that gives us salvation. For all who believe in him shall have eternal life.

That's just the promise of the light. What about the coming of the light? The coming of the light is more complicated, is it not? Verse 9, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him.” Oh, that sentence. That Christ came into the world and the world was made through him, but his very creation and the crown of creation, man and woman, did not know him. He came to his very own people, yet his own people did not receive him. If that is not the picture of God's grace—that though he knew this would be the case, just as we've heard about in Isaiah—even though he knew that suffering would be his lot, yet God in his grace came anyway. The light came even though he knew that darkness would try to push back. We hear this as well in the opening chapters of John. Hear this, which is very familiar to you. John 3:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. [John 3:16-21]

The rejection of the light is so simply human. We don't like our mess-ups being exposed. We don't want our shortcomings being on the big screen. We don't want our moral failures being witnessed by

others. And so humans do what humans do; we try to hide. And yet, though Christ came, though his very own rejected him, though the darkness tried to push back, though we want to escape exposure—yet when we realize that Christ came not to condemn the world but to save it, we realize that the light of Christ is a very different light.

Ladies and gentlemen, our culture is replete with the following story and narrative, is it not—we love to build others up, and we love to see it portrayed on screens small and large, internet, everywhere. And yet when their downfall happens, that also attracts a lot of light. A lot of very important and powerful people have fallen over the last number of weeks, and by their own choosing. Some we may not care about. Probably we could easily say, “Oh, well they had it coming.” And yet the reality of the Gospel is, would any of us stand up under the exposure of the judgmental light of our culture? Of those who have fallen, may God and the light of his grace bring redemption.

Because the light that our world knows is a light that only exposes guilt and doesn't bring grace. God's light does both. It both exposes our guilt and gives us the grace that covers our shame, and removes it. Yet we still struggle. We still want to escape the light. And yet the Lord reminds us every Christmas, “The light has come.” But that light has brought grace, not condemnation. So he says to us, “Come. In your sin, come. In your shame, come. In your filth, come. And I will make you clean.” Now, that is a light that is worth walking in. That is a light we ought to be praying for in our world. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Who can stand? Yet by his grace, we can be redeemed.

Finally, it's walking in the light. It isn't just the promise. It isn't just the coming of Christ in his radiance, in the midst of our rejection. It is the walking in the light. He says in verse 12 and following, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” And if God wills and brings forth this light and proclaims us as children who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we must hear the following truth—that is not the end game. It isn't just that he brings us through Christ and declares us as children. He means to make us new. He means for us not just to receive the light, but to walk in it. There's a verse in Titus 3 that speaks of this well. Titus 2, rather. Here's what it says, verse 11:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.
[Titus 2:11-14]

Paul encapsulates in this letter to Titus—he says, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” That idea of appearing is again drawing on this whole metaphor of light. For the coming of Christ has appeared, and this grace of God has appeared. It has brought salvation. Yes and amen. But for what end? To make us a new people.

So what it calls for here, to walk in the light, is twofold. It is to receive it, the gift of the light of Christ that is the grace of Christ. But it is also to walk in his light. It is to, by God's grace, as we learned from these verses, by the resolve that that grace brings, the power that the Holy Spirit brings with the grace and the light of Christ, we also walk in the light. And he tells us here, it is that grace and that light and the beauty of Christ that trains us. Because we need that training. We need that coaching. We need that power. It trains us to renounce ungodliness, worldly desires, to walk by the Spirit in self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age—not in arrogance, not in comparison to others, but in humble reliance on the grace of God in Christ. Not so that we can point fingers. No, so that we can love others as we have been loved.

You see, many will hear this message today, both here in this room and around the world. And do you know, their first complaint is not about Jesus? Their first complaint will be, “Well, yeah, but look at his people.” It’s true. We do not often love. We all often can be caught in hypocrisy and judgmentalism and arrogance. And yet, what this trains us to do, what it trains us to remember, is that if Christ is the radiance of God’s glory, we who proclaim Christ as Savior are meant to be ambassadors, as Paul says, and we are meant to be the radiance of the glory of Christ. So that when we walk in the light, we do so for the purpose that we might love others, that we might feed others who are hungry, that we might care for others who cannot find relationship, that we might be a place not built on success or background or skin color but a place that is built upon the grace of Christ. That is the great leveler. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is God’s grace that makes us new, not our way of thinking, not our innate intellect, not our reasoning skills—but it is by grace alone. And if we are called to walk in the light, we do so by grace alone. If we love, we do so by grace alone. And we do not point. We do not ridicule. We do not tear down. Rather, we seek to love.

And thereby, we become the message of Christ in the world, witnesses to the light of how it has changed us, that it might train us, as Paul says, to self-controlled, upright, godly lives, waiting for our blessed hope in the appearing of the great glory of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—and this is how I finish—who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness, to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Zealous so that we can be safe, fat, saved, and happy? that we can be saved by grace alone for Christ alone, that we might make his love known to the world, alone.

This is what we are called to do. For as John says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” By God’s will, the light has come into the darkness, and that light is the grace and person of Christ, to make a people for his own, that we might walk in the light for his glory alone. May the Lord bless you with his grace. May he renew you by the hope of Christ. May he equip us to walk in the light, that we might make the light known through good works for his glory alone. Let’s pray.

Father, I ask that your Spirit would come, that you would renew us, that you would strengthen us, that you would make us a people of humble rejoicing, of humble reliance, but a humble witness to the light, that by your grace at work through us, we, too, might be witnesses to the light that has come for our salvation to make us new, to make you known. For Christ’s name we pray. Amen.