

December 11, 2005
Isaiah 60:1-6, John 1:1-18
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“The Light in Our Darkness”

*In the great green room,
there was a telephone and a red balloon,
and a picture of a cow jumping over the moon;
three little bears sitting on chairs,
two little kittens and a pair of mittens,
a little toy house and a young mouse,
a comb and a brush and a bowl full of mush
and a quiet old lady who was whispering, "Hush!"*

So begins the children's classic story, *Goodnight Moon*. The first time I ever read *Goodnight Moon* to our daughter, I thought the author had something seriously wrong with her. What on earth could she have been thinking? Before long, I found the simple images, rhyme, words and cadences of the book to have a calming effect not only on our young daughter but also on her old dad. What on earth could I have been thinking? There must have been something seriously wrong with me! As our daughter prepared for her least favorite moment of the day, which was going to bed, I found myself feeling soothed by the old lady in a rocking chair whispering, "Hush." The book continues by saying "Goodnight" to all the things in the room. *Goodnight Moon* helped our daughter name and order the mysterious and sometimes frightening things in the world around her.

Amid all the uncertainties and dangers of life, we long for a sense of order and meaning in the universe in which we live. We may be in the best of health, live in the comfort of our own homes and still feel the uncertainty of life. With all of our degrees, certifications, credit cards, portfolios and insurance papers, we may still wonder from time to time who we are and where we are. No matter how secure we try to make our world, the dark dangers of life are always threatening to overcome the light.

We need to hear the simple but ancient truth that dispels the darkness and brings us to the light of God's Word. We listen with open ears and longing hearts to the words of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." It is more than just the sound of these simple words that calms our spirits. In hearing the words, the universe around us is named and put in order. The opening words of John remind us that Christ himself, the Word made flesh, is with us. These words tell us three things that make sense of our human experience in the world.

First, John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God. The Greek term for word is *logos*. *Logos* had meaning to both Greeks and Jews. Six centuries before the coming of Jesus, the

Greek Heraclitus spoke of logos as the "eternal principle of order in the universe." (Raymond Brown, *The Anchor Bible Commentary: The Gospel of John*, 520) Other Greek philosophers thought of the logos as the mind of God that shaped, created or gave order to the universe. To the Hebrew prophets, the Word of God was active, creative and powerful. In Psalm 33, we hear that "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made." In the traditions of Israel, Wisdom is like the Word that is sent from God to accomplish the will of God. In Proverbs 8 we hear Wisdom say, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of all his acts of long ago." John proclaims that this same logos of God became flesh in Jesus and dwelt among us.

This morning we are using as our Affirmation of Faith the words of Paul in the Letter to the Colossians, in which Paul declares that "Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... and in him all things hold together."

This is the scandal of the gospel message. The God who dwells beyond time and space and who created the heavens and the earth, comes to dwell with us in Jesus, a carpenter's son who lived two thousand years ago in Nazareth. In the Old Testament lesson, we hear the prophet Isaiah say that the light has come. The light shall dispel the thick darkness that covers the earth. Jesus is the light of God. He brings light and life to the world. Jesus is not just like God, similar to God or closer to God than anybody else. The very being of God is manifest in Jesus. John says that everything that is created has its origin and life in the Word. There is nothing in the universe that does not depend for its existence upon the creative work of God in Christ. God has entered the world of human experience in Jesus.

Secondly, John tells us that the world is full of darkness. Sometimes, the universe in which we live seems like an alien land full of strange realities and terrifying experiences. We may swagger around and try to act brave; but, more often than not, we are like children whistling in the dark. The peaceful course of our lives can be brought to a sudden end when we hear that someone we love has cancer. I know a woman who seems to have everything going for her. She has a flourishing career, good health, financial security, and a lot of good friends. Her children are doing well in college. Gradually, over the last few years, she has begun to feel - what's the word? - superfluous. She no longer feels needed. The darkness creeps in and chases away the light. Soon, it seems that everywhere she turns all she sees is the darkness of doubt and emptiness. She cannot find the light.

We can look out and shake our heads at the cruelty we see around us. How can people be so brutal to each other; how can people be so indifferent to the suffering of others? We are dumbfounded by the violence in our homes and schools. We are horrified as we watch human civilization dissolve into ethnic conflict. Shakespeare's tragic figures, Othello, Lear and Hamlet, knew that the darkness lies not only beyond us in the evils we oppose, but also within us. Our own jealousy, foolishness and obsessions lead us into a darkness that has the power to destroy us.

Even when the light is present, we do not always see it. It is a great mystery why some see the light of God's presence in Jesus and others do not yet see it. Recently, I was talking with a man who had lived a life that many would call successful. He was married with

children. His family business was doing well. He and his wife had lively friends and a busy social life. Over the years, the husband's heavy social drinking turned into alcoholism. Out of desperation, he turned toward the church. Into his life, the light of Christ began to dawn. He gave up drinking; he began to study the Bible and eventually teach the Bible. He found new friends whose interests were different from what he had known before. He became active in helping others in crisis. As we talked, he told me about a mutual friend who had lots of ability but who never lived up to his potential. His friend was also a heavy drinker, who seemed to move from one self-induced crisis to another. The man said, "The sad thing is that he doesn't even see the problem. He doesn't even realize there is a different way to live."

John says that Jesus' own people did not receive him. The very ones who should have recognized Jesus as the Word sent from God did not accept him. In fact, many people rejected Jesus. Many people reject him today. Some reject Jesus because they "just don't get it." Others see the light but cannot give up the things that come between them and the light. So it was with the rich young man who came to Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. He was not an evil person. In fact, he was a good person who had kept the law all of his life and tried to do right toward others. Jesus saw that great wealth stood between this young man and the kingdom. Jesus said, "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me." The rich man could not part with the security or well-being that his possessions gave him. He went away sorrowfully. Some people love the darkness more than the light.

Finally, John says that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The King James Version of the Bible says, "the darkness comprehended it not." There are many ways of understanding this word we render "overcome" or "comprehend." It can mean "to understand with the mind" or "to grasp the significance of something." The world does not grasp the significance of Jesus. The world thinks that there are other matters like money and power that are far more important. The word can mean "to welcome" or "to accept something." The world still does not welcome Jesus. The world is still at war; the world still condones hatred; and the world still treats human life as something cheap.

The word can also mean "to overtake" or "to master something." Here, John reminds us that no matter how things appear, no matter how deep the darkness seems, the light of Christ is not overcome. One of the reasons that terrorism has such power is that it rises out of nowhere with a might that threatens to overcome the order and stability of life. Terrorism cannot extinguish the light of Christ that shines in the darkness.

It is astonishing to see what happens when we are in a dark place and light one candle. The light of one candle is powerful enough to pierce the darkness. One kind word can encourage a broken heart; one act of forgiveness can reconcile enemies; one deed of love can give hope to the poor. One man's death on a cross can give life to the world. You and I are witnesses to the light. We have seen his glory. We know what Christ can do. He keeps us safe in the overwhelming darkness of our world. He delivers us from the darkness of our own hearts. He invites us to live in the light of his presence forever. He calls us to share the light with others. All who believe in the light are given power to become children of God.

When I was in Norfolk, Virginia, I took turns with some other ministers in leading chapel services at the Community Hospital. Actually, it had very little community support and was far less than a hospital. It was a long-term critical care facility for children, youth and adults who had serious health problems, dementia, or disabilities. Most of the residents had exhausted their financial resources. Many had no family. The building was old, dirty, and unattractive. If it were not for the staff and the volunteers, it would have been a dreary place indeed.

There was a group of men and women from a local church who hosted and provided music for the weekly services. Each week, these volunteers gathered the congregation in their rolling chairs and reclining beds. Some of the congregation came in under their own steam on walkers and in wheel chairs. When I taught the Bible to this diverse congregation, I wondered if I was making any kind of connection. When we sang familiar hymns, said the Lord's prayer or recited the 23rd Psalm, I saw heads rise, hands clap, mouths move and hearts stir. Familiar words and music of the faith led them beyond the dirty brown tile walls, the glaring fluorescent lights, and curtainless aluminum windows to something deep, beautiful and familiar at the center of life. The well-known words and music reassured them that they were connected to something, or someone, greater than the cheerless environment of that hospital and the difficult circumstances of their lives. The words of Scripture and the songs of the faith took away the darkness, named their world for them and calmed their fears. In those moments of worship, they could see themselves as they really were - children of God - beloved, whole, valued and free.

When we are full of doubt and fear and when it seems like the darkness is more than we can bear, when we are afraid to sleep at night or face a new day, these words of John remind us of the simple but essential truth. The God whom we know in Jesus Christ has made and has redeemed this world. Even though the darkness seems great, the light of Christ is greater still. The light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it! In his light we see ourselves as we truly are - beloved children of God.