

Christmas at John's House
Genesis 1:1-5, John 1:1-5
First Presbyterian Church
December 22, 2019

Introduction to the Reading

During our Advent journey this year we have imagined each of the four Gospels as a home we are visiting for Christmas. And each week we have asked: Where does the Gospel writer think the good news of Jesus Christ begins? How does this author begin the story? We've been to Mark's simple, spare cottage where there are no obvious signs it is Christmas. For Mark, Christmas takes place in the wilderness when Jesus comes to us. We've been to Matthew's large, rambling home to find a big family reunion where a fascinating cast of characters going back countless generations is gathered together. In the third house, we stopped by to visit Luke and savored the deep beauty of Christmas decorations and food and songs... a live nativity on the front lawn... and best of all we got to hold the baby. Holding a baby can give us tremendous hope. Today, we are going to visit John's house... and I'll tell you now that it is very different from the rest. The first challenge is just finding the place. The directions are a little sketchy... the house sits far off the main road. Once you find the driveway, you wind down a long, dark road with trees pressing in on both sides. And just when you think you are completely lost, you round a curve, go up a hill, and there it is – no decorations... no inflatable shepherds or magi or angels in the yard. There isn't even a baby. Instead, there is light... provided by single candles burning in every window... light shining in the darkness.¹

John 1: 1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Sermon

Now, since we are visiting his house, let's first be clear just who John is. Some confuse him with John the Baptist – John was a popular name. But this John is no roughneck prophet out in the desert. In fact, John lives in a nice house where the bookcases in his living room are stuffed with well-worn volumes of Greek ethics and Hebrew prophesy. This is not John the fire-breathing repentance preacher, it is John reader... the scholar... the philosopher. The writer of the fourth Gospel.

Let me tell you how Scott Black Johnston imagines our visit to his house. Each window looking out on the world contains a single candle.

¹ This summary draws from Scott Black Johnston's sermon, "Christmas at John's House" (see Day1.org) and Cynthia Campbell's *Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes* (WJK, 2019) p.37-38

John meets us at the door... a fire crackling in the professor's hearth. Next to the fire, two comfortable armchairs face each other. Between them sits a small table, glasses and a bottle of red wine. "Sit down," says John. "Relax. I'll pour. Let's talk." Unlike his neighbors, John won't tell you a story or read you a genealogy. He wants conversation – a long, deep, honest conversation about the meaning of pretty much... everything! He wants to sip cabernet and debate the fate of the world... the purpose of human beings... and the ways of God. He wants to pull books off the shelf and read snippets of poetry to you. "Listen to this" he says, "it's from Isaiah (you may have heard of him): *The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light...* Gosh, that's beautiful, right? What do you think it means? What is the darkness? What is the great light? Personally, I think the only way to figure it out – to figure anything out, really - is to start at the beginning."²

And that's precisely where John starts: "In the beginning..." Same exact words as in Genesis... which, of course, is not an accident – THIS, John says, is where the good news of Jesus Christ really starts – at the beginning... of everything! Just as Genesis does, John transports us back before humans existed... back before the dinosaurs tromped around... back through time and space to that instant just before the Big Bang, when all there was... was God. Back there... in the very beginning, was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. And according to Genesis, the first thing that came into being was light... "Let there be light!"

"Sip your wine," John urges, looking at your untouched glass... "this is heady stuff, I know." But this is what Christmas is about – God, Word, darkness, light, life. God enters the world, just as Isaiah promised: "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

I love those words... I have loved the privilege of saying them every Christmas Eve night now for 36 years. But the truth is – as beautiful as they are and as much as I love them – I wish that John had said something else – I wish he had declared that when the light comes into the world it obliterates the darkness... that when the light comes into the world it takes the bleak mid-winter of every sadness, every despair, every raw deal, every evil plan, every god-awful, life sucking disease, and tosses the whole mess into the cosmic trash.³

But instead of that... instead of total victory, we get something more modest. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not overcome it... did not extinguish it... did not put out the light completely. To be sure, John's claim more accurately fits our experience – in the 2,000 years since the light was born in Bethlehem, the darkness is just as dark. Is there any less suffering... any less meanness in the human spirit... and less hatred and heartache? In fact, there is so much that it may seem that the darkness has already won – that its victory is assured. John nods in agreement: "Yes, but there is more to be said..."

² Johnston.

³ Quoting Johnston.

I read this week of a very creative seminary student who was preparing a lesson on the ninth chapter of Isaiah. That's the chapter in which the prophet proclaims, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined."⁴ Well, to get the class to really experience the passage, she decided to find the darkest place on campus... which turned out to be a little-used racket ball court. It was accessed by going down two flights of steps and through some heavy doors. The court was essentially underground. The student discovered that when you got inside and shut the door and turned off the lights it got REALLY dark in there... not one stray photon bouncing around to make an impression on a human retina. It was scary dark!

When the day arrived, she brought the class down the stairs... through the doors... and sat them down around the edges of the court. She said, "You are people who live in a land of deep darkness." And she turned out the light. A few students gasped... then it got quiet... and she waited. In the hush... and in the dark... they sat. They sat and waited. After five minutes... five surprisingly long, silent, and dark minutes, she read the words, "Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined." And with those words she struck a match... and lit a small candle.

Now, as I understand it, there is no way a small candle could even begin to fill that vast room with light. But it did change things. Because in that flickering light people saw themselves, and they saw each other. They saw faces - surprised faces, puzzled faces... and even a couple of faces streaked with tears. For those in deep darkness... a little light made all the difference.

In John's house, the professor leans forward and whispers: "My experience is that God refuses to watch our hardship from a safe distance... but climbs into the darkest places to be with us – to light a candle alongside us. The light may not obliterate the darkness, but is a sign that God is still there... among us... as one of us. By this light we know for sure that God is not far off in some distant heaven... or so far back in the dim reaches of time that God doesn't matter... but is "Emmanuel" ... with us now.

John's house may be hard to find... and will never be mistaken for Clark Griswold's house in the movie "Christmas Vacation" when the lights finally come on. No, it's a single candle in every window... it is light in the darkness... enough to illumine the path ahead and to see one another's faces. Enough to know that God is with us... and that the darkness will not win.

⁴ Isaiah 9:2