

SERMON: “What Are You Getting for Christmas?” Pt. 2 Dec. 6, 2009
“...Light and Life”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Almighty God, you have sent to us the light of your Word incarnate, to dispel the darkness of sin and fear, and to guide us in your ways of peace. Through the words we shall now read and proclaim, let the light of your truth shine into our lives this day, that through faith we may born anew to the fullness of life you give to all your beloved children; through Christ, the Light of life. Amen.

Gospel Lesson: John 1:1-13

Throughout this Advent season we are exploring the meaning of the gift of Jesus Christ in light of the magnificent prologue to the Gospel of John. There, in inspired theological poetry of the highest order, John sets the birth of Jesus, not just in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, but in the context of all that God has intended from the beginning of creation. John stretches our minds with the most profound witness to the meaning of Christ’s birth in all the New Testament. Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus’ birth in marvelous stories that many of us know by heart and that we enact every year in our Christmas pageants. But John stretches even wider our understanding of what we, and all the world, receive in the gift of Jesus Christ. He sets before us the central claim of Christmas--that in the birth of Jesus, Son of Mary, the Creator of the heavens and the earth has come to share our life to the fullest and to dwell with us forever.

John links Christ to Creation itself. Echoing the language of Genesis 1, John declares, **“In the beginning was the Word and 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.”** In some unfathomable sense, all that is bears the stamp of God’s eternal love in Jesus Christ. There are not two gods in conflict with one another—one that creates a world of tumors and

tarantulas, and one that redeems and saves from us that world. No, Christianity insists that is only one God who creates all that is through the same redeeming love we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For John, and for all the New Testament, Christ and Creation are inseparably linked. Our Creator and our Redeemer are one.

If we were to ask *theologically* “What Are We Getting for Christmas?”, we might begin by saying, as we did last week, that in Christ we get a world of wonder and joy, created through him and redeemed by him. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that at the Christmas season, more than any other time of the year, that we celebrate the joys of our life together in God’s good creation. We do so by sharing wonderful meals, as we will do later this morning, by lighting our trees and decorating our homes, by sending cards to friends near and far, and giving to ministries of compassion throughout the community, as we invite you to do next Sunday at our Alternative Christmas Market. Christmas brings out “the better angels of our nature” more than any other holiday season.

John links the birth of Jesus to the God’s work of creation itself, and then immediately he goes on to insist that **“What has come into being in Christ was *life*, and the life was the *light* of all.”** In Jesus Christ we receive the gift of **life and light.**

Those two images, of light and life, recur throughout the Gospel of John. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John Jesus will say, **“I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”** And he will say, **“I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.”** And toward the end of his gospel John will state the purpose for which his gospel was written--**“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,**

the Son of God, and in believing you may have life in his name.” And in his First Letter, John will declare, **“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.”**

Light and life! We sing, as we did this morning, “Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.” **Light and life.** Those two great images recur throughout scripture. But what’s the relationship between the two? And how do they relate to our own lives?

Begin by considering how closely **light and life** are joined. The Genesis account of creation says that “in the beginning” the first thing that God created was light, and “God saw that the light was good.” Very good indeed. Apart from light, life as we know it would scarcely be possible. Oceanographers have discovered strange creatures in the depths of the sea that somehow have adapted to a world of almost complete darkness. But almost everything else that lives on the face of the earth requires light. Without enough light plants wither and die. And so do we. As the days get shorter and the nights longer, our moods are affected. Psychologists call it “Seasonally Affected Disorder.” S.A.D. Even a week of rainy, over-cast weather is enough to send most of us into a funk. Light is necessary for the flourishing of life.

What’s more, in almost every religion **light** is a symbol of the divine. One of the first things that human beings began to worship was the sun. There were sun gods throughout the ancient world, and throughout the northern hemisphere, people of almost every culture have observed a special celebration around the time of the winter solstice. In ancient Rome the midwinter festival was known as *Saturnalia*. *Saturnalia* ran for a week, from December 17 to the 23rd. It has been described as a time of “riotous merry-making.” Homes and temples were decorated with cut evergreens. Lamp were kept burning to ward off the spirits of

darkness. Schools were closed, the army rested, and no criminals were executed. The order of society was reversed as slaves were served by their masters. Friends visited one another, bringing gifts of fruit and cakes, candles, dolls and jewelry. And on December 25th there was a great celebration in Rome known as *Natalis Invicti Solis*, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. It was one of the most popular festivals of the year.

It was on that very day, December 25th, that in the fourth century Christians in Rome began celebrating what we know as Christmas. The choice of the date was deliberate, and in many ways, defiant. December 25th was chosen not for historical reasons. There was no birth-certificate stating that Jesus was born on that day. The choice of December 25th was entirely theological. St. Augustine said that on the day that pagan Rome celebrated the rebirth of the sun, Christians celebrated the birth of the “Son of Righteousness,” who created the sun. Celebrating the birth of Jesus on the day the Roman Empire was celebrating the feast of the Unconquered Sun, was a way of staking out the Christian claim over against the claims of the pagan empire. Jesus is Lord, not Caesar! We worship, not the sun god, but the God who created the sun. “Hail the new-born Prince of peace! Hail the Son of righteousness! Life and light to all he brings...”

Ever since, during the Christmas season, we have put lights in our windows and on our trees to symbolize the coming of the One who is the true Light that enlightens everyone who believes. The light of his love dispels the darkness of sin or ignorance, and no darkness, not even the final darkness of death, can overcome the light of life he brings. That is the gospel in a nut shell.

Across the centuries Christians have insisted that the light of Christ's grace and truth brings Life, life abundant, life eternal, life in all its fullness. **“In him was life, and the life was the light of all.”**

Here, let's move those images of light and life off of the pages of scripture and into the experiences of our own lives. I am sure we've all known people who just seem to “light up a room” whenever they enter it. They brighten our lives simply by their presence. We've all known ones whose lives radiate an inner beauty and love, that draws us and others to them.

In a similar fashion I'm sure we have all known people who have a way of making us feel more alive just by being around them. There is something infectious about the way they live and the way they encourage us to live. Their joy of living brings out the best in us.

That, in part, is what the first followers of Jesus meant when they called him the **“Light of Life.”** He brought the radiance of God into the midst of daily life. He lived the fully human life God had intended from the beginning. The life of Jesus of Nazareth was so open to the presence and power of the Spirit of God—his life was “so transparent” we might say, that in everything he did, the glory of God shown through. As the Apostle Paul would exclaim, **“The God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shown in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”** That's a mouthful, but I think we can understand at least a part of what Paul had in mind. In Jesus the Christ, the light of God's love shines into our lives in a way that makes us more fully alive ourselves.

The link between his life and ours is the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed, which we will recite in a moment, has a wonderful phrase in which it calls the Holy Spirit **“the Lord and giver of life.”** By the power of the Holy Spirit, “the Lord and Giver of life,” the eternal aliveness of Jesus Christ flows into us and empowers us to be more fully and wonderfully alive ourselves. I cannot explain it. I cannot describe how it happens. I can only point with John and with countless men and women of faith down through the centuries to the fact that it does happen. In the deep mystery of God’s grace, it does happen. **“In him was life...”**

But here we need to acknowledge honestly that it does not happen automatically, and it does not happen for all. John knows all too well that the coming of Jesus occasioned not only welcome and acceptance, but rejection and fierce opposition. **“He came to his own and his own received him not.”** To some the light of life he brings exposes too much that they would rather keep hidden. Light not only illumines. It shows things as they really are. And some of us have a vested interest in living by the illusions of our own darkness. Turn on a bright light in a basement cellar, and the rats and cockroaches will not be drawn to the light. They will flee into whatever dark corner they can hide.

And as for the beauty of his life, it was Nietzsche who said, “He had to die. His beauty exposed our ugliness, and he had to die.” **“He came to his own and his own received him not.”**

But that’s not the end of the matter, thank Goodness. John goes on. **“To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”** Matthew and Luke in their gospels tell of the

Virgin Birth of Jesus. John tells of our own “virgin birth.” We become children of God, not because we were born to the right parents, not by means of our own efforts or our best intentions. We are born into faith solely by the gracious gift of God, the Father of the faithful. Our role in all this is to trust that it is indeed so, and to respond with Mary, **“Let it be to me accord to your word.”**

What are you and I getting for Christmas? No less than the light of God that no darkness can overcome, and the life of God within us, that even death itself cannot destroy. Light and life. That is what we are getting for Christmas. For **“In him was life and the life was the light of all.”** Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Allen C. McSween
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC