

This is one of my *two* favorite services of the year. Judging by the number who come every year, it is one of *your* favorite services, too. There have been years when the only seat left in the sanctuary was the middle chair behind the pulpit, sometimes even that one is taken.

My favorite part of the service comes right after the sermon, when we turn all the lights out, including the tree, and in the dark Hank sings “O Holy Night,” one of the loveliest and most moving of all the Christmas carols. Then, as we read passages from scripture, we begin to pass the light of our candles to each other. Soon the whole sanctuary is filled with a warm glow. To me there is no more beautiful sight in worship than seeing your faces bathed in candlelight as we sing “Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright.”

But my other favorite service is quite different. It is the **Good Friday “service of darkness”** It is as different from this one as night and day. Instead of lighting candles whose glow is reflected throughout the sanctuary, we extinguish candles, until the whole sanctuary is dark. The Good Friday service is the polar opposite of tonight’s Christmas Eve service. One celebrates a birth and ends with light and laughter—the other commemorates a death and ends in silence and darkness. Life and death—light and darkness.

In the full telling of the Christian story both are necessary—the birth that brings the Light of life into our darkness, and the final assault of the darkness that seeks to “cross-out” the light. Both are necessary—the light and the darkness. Without holding the two together, the Christmas story is in danger of devolving into sheer sentimentality and the brutality of “Good Friday” is liable to drive us to despair.

The light of Christmas and the darkness of the Cross belong together. The one whose birth we celebrate this “holy night” is the one who gives his life to break the powers of sin and death in order to redeem the whole creation. That is the gospel of Christmas that brings joy to all the world.

Throughout the centuries people of faith have used the symbol of light shining in the darkness to depict the meaning of Christ’s birth. John presents the image most dramatically in those stirring words from the prologue to his gospel that we have been pondering throughout this Advent season, and which we read again this evening. “**In him was life and the life was the light of all... The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.**”

Images of light and darkness recur throughout John’s gospel, as indeed they recur throughout scripture. Long before John used the image of light shining in the darkness, the image was already well-familiar to the people of God. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had declared in hope, “**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.**” So “**arise, shine!**” he encourages his hearers in the darkness of Israel’s time of exile of Babylon.

“**Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen**

**upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.”** (Isaiah 60:1-3)

We will hear those words again this evening as we light our candles that drive back the darkness.

Luke in his gospel uses a similar image when he has **Zechariah**, the father of John the Baptist, prophesy that, with the coming of the long-awaited Christ of God, **“the day shall dawn on us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”** Light in the midst of darkness--life in the shadow of death.

All the New Testament writers agree in one way or another that in the coming of Jesus the Christ, the light of God's love has dawned in our darkness. Paul exclaims, **“The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”** He is the bright morning star. In him a new day has dawned for the whole human race. The light of his grace and truth shines in every darkness.

That's a word of gospel we very much need to hear and take to heart in these dark and darkening days. Any way you look at it, we, too, are **“people who walk in darkness.”** The image needs no explanation. It resonates in the hearts of all of us. In this church we have said goodbye over the past year to some of the great saints who have blessed our life together, and in my own family we have said goodbye to one who brightened all our lives. And just the other day our son called to say that his wife's brother had committed suicide. For many this has been a dark year indeed. And not just a dark year, but a dark **decade**. *Time* magazine called it ‘the decade from hell.’ There is no denying the darkness that threatens to engulf us like a suffocating fog.

And yet, the gospel of Christmas declares, “Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid to name the darkness in your own life for what it is. And don't think that you can, or that you must, deal with it alone. For in the midst of whatever darkness you and I find ourselves in this night, the angel of the Lord declares, **“Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy.... For to you—TO YOU!--is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”**

This evening in the darkness of our lives and our world, we light candles of hope and love that drive back the darkness--even if only for a moment, even if only as a lovely symbol of the great promise that, no matter how dark it may get, the light of God's love in Jesus Christ shines on, and no darkness, not even the final darkness of death, can ever put it out. He is the Light of life that enlightens all who believe. And in him, John assures us, **“there is no darkness at all.”** In the birth of Jesus, the Christ, a new day has dawned. A candle has been lit in the universe. The powers of darkness are beginning to be dispelled. **“His light shines in every darkness and the darkness has not put it out.”**

Like a flickering candle, the light he brings does not dispell the darkness all at once, as much as we might wish it were otherwise. There is still much darkness around us and within us all. And as for the way his light comes into the world, then and now, Phillips Brooks was right, **“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given, so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his Heaven.”**

Herod was not awakened by a blaze of light filling the night sky. And only a band of common, ordinary shepherds heard the song of the heavenly host. And it seems that even the star of Bethlehem captured the attention only of those wise enough already to be looking for it.

Jesus did not burst onto the world’s stage with full media coverage on every channel. There were no paparazzi whose flashbulbs lit up the night. He was not greeted by throngs of adoring fans. He came to his own, says John, and even his own did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, **“to all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who are born not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God.”**

The same is true this night. The Lord Jesus does not overwhelm us with the splendor of coming. He does not blind us with the light of his grace and truth. He comes in majestic humility to stoop to conquer in love. Everything about the Christmas story points to the startling simplicity of the light of God dawning in a world that for so long had lain “in sin and error pining.”

There is a second stanza to the lovely carol “O Holy Night” that is not as familiar as the other two, but which picks up well this image of light in our darkness.

“Let by the light of faith serenely beaming,  
With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand.  
So, led by the light of a star sweetly gleaming,  
Here came the wise men from Orient land.  
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,  
In all our trials born to be our friend.  
He knows our need, to our weakness, (he is) no stranger,  
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!<sup>1</sup>

The promise of the gospel is that he who comes to us as quietly and vulnerably as a flickering candle will one day at last be seen in his full glory. Then we shall no longer see **“through a glass darkly,”** but face to face, and **“every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”** “Behold your King! Before Him—let all creation--lowly bend!”

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<sup>1</sup> “O Holy Night,” Words of Cappeau De Roquemaure, translated by John S. Dwight, usic by Adolphe Adam, arr. Patrick Liebergen.

On this “holy night,” there is much darkness in the world and in our own lives, to be sure. And yet a **candle** has been lit, and a **Word of promise** has been given. And to us a **Savior** is born, whose grace and truth shines on in every darkness. For

**“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.**

**We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.**

**And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace....**

**The light shines in the darkness**

**and no darkness shall ever put it out.”**

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Allen McSween, Jr.  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Greenville, SC