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Jeremiah 31:7-14
John 1:1-18
Psalm 147: 12-20

Faith Like Noontide Shining Bright

Welcome to the second of my promised two-part sermon series on the interpretation of Christmas in the Gospels. When last we left our Gospel writers, we had gone through the adoration of the infant Jesus by the hosts of heaven on Christmas Eve, and then the persecution of Jesus's family by Herod in Matthew last week. We wisely decided to skip right over Mark, because there's not much to talk about in Mark. So that Brings us to John, the Fourth Gospel. Now, I've been reading and rereading the Prologue to John over this past week, and each time I did, I began to wonder if I might not learn to stop making promises without a detailed plan about how to keep them. But promise I did, and so here we are, in this rarified, elevated language so well known and recognized. Bill said on Christmas Eve, "A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This same passage closes out the Easter week service of Tenebrae. So beautiful, so artful, so mysterious, so viscerally uplifting and hopeful. What does it tell us about Christmas?

Last week, I told you that the Gospel of Matthew shows us how to set the Jesus story in context for an audience. We talked about Dickens's adaptation of the Christmas story for the Victorian era and how we, ourselves, updated the story for today, living the story and letting the story live in us. And this is a good way to look at Scriptures. Understand what they SAID, so you can understand what they SAY. In a Bible full of characters and places and countries and stories

that are no longer familiar to us, this is almost the only way we CAN understand the Bible. So, you probably listened to the reading just now and said, "well, that sounds nice, in the old Shakespearean English, I can't wait for Nathan to explain what it's talking about."

Well, I'll tell you something. I haven't the foggiest idea what John meant in his own time and his own context. Part of that is that I know the history of Israel a lot better than I know the platonic philosophy that is behind the symbolism John uses here. But part of it is because we can't really figure out what John's context was. Scholars feel like they have something of a handle on Matthew, Mark and Luke, and certainly Paul, but interpretations of John change every ten years. We have a pretty good current theory of John, but it doesn't have anything to do with this prologue, this poem, this hymn. No history lesson like Luke, no lineage and allegory like Matthew. Like Mark, the other gospel without a birth narrative, John starts his story with John the Baptist. But while Mark jumps right in, John gives us this. And for that reason, we read John on the second Saturday after Christmas.

Because, for all the mysterious language and Greek symbolism, John offers us something more direct than the other Gospels. The other Gospels use plain language to mask their meaning. Luke tells us,

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." We can easily understand good news, great joy, a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

These are all concepts we find familiar, and can touch. But what does it mean for the child to be Messiah? What does it mean for the child to be a Saviour? We say these words, but

preachers and theologians have spent centuries trying to explain what these things should, or could mean to us. It's hard to explain. I know. I've tried. To understand the idea of a Messiah as expected by these first-century Jews today is not easy, not clear. We have to spend a lot of time making these words meaningful again and I, for one, am never sure we're getting it quite right.

John, in his opaque language, is much more straightforward. Because, this Prologue explains to us what it is we are about to see in the Jesus story. If you haven't gotten it yet, here it is: He is not only the successor to the Abrahamic patriarchs, like last week. He is not a Davidic Messiah, as was expected, but Jesus is the light of the world, a presence that has been with the world since the beginning and will be with the world until the end. "What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Jesus came to be with us in the world and light our darkness. This is a clear Christmas message. How many of you feel the darkness weighing down on you in the winter months? How many of you found your days just a little brighter after the fog lifted earlier this week and we got that beautiful light on New Year's Eve day? John, knowing the weight that a literal as well as a figurative darkness can put on our shoulders, tells us that Jesus came to bring light to our darkness and to drive the shadows away. That's what happened at Christmas. The light that had been with us from the beginning, just out of our sight, came to be with us in the world so that we could bask in its warmth, stoke our own fires and spread it out around us. Because that light was the light of all people.

Dickens knew what John meant. He didn't need to translate this idea to a modern era, he just took it as it was. The Ghost of Christmas Present carries with him a torch in A Christmas Carol, and from that light he sprinkles incense to spread good cheer on Christmas. As Scrooge and that Ghost take their tour of his Christmas night, Dickens takes us out upon the moor in the desolation, "in the thick gloom of darkest night"

“What place is this?” asked Scrooge.

“A place where Miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth,” returned the Spirit.

“But they know me. See!”

A light shone from the window of a hut, and swiftly they advanced towards it. Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire." Dickens knew as surely as John did that a light shines in the darkness and lightens the hearts of all people. There is nowhere on earth beyond the reach of Christmas, so long as there are people to remember it and believe in it and bask in the light. In the times when hope is nearly overcome by fear, in the times when we look ahead and see only uncertainty and shadow, we can be comforted by the knowledge that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. As surely as Jesus was there at the beginning with the creating of the world, and Jesus was there with the patriarchs, and Jesus came to walk among us in ancient Israel, Jesus is with us now, and Jesus will be with us tomorrow, and Jesus will help us overcome the darkness, if only we let him.

But we don't always embrace that Promise. Because the darkness is tricky. The darkness sneaks up on you. And it comes by other names to match the times. Realism, Practicality, Belt-tightening, tough love. These are words from the darkness. We are surrounded by shadows, especially now, as our recession goes on and on, and people on the TV fret about the chances for a double-dip recession. A double-dip recession? We've never dug ourselves out! Unemployment is at 10% and the average unemployed person has been searching for new work for more than eight months! And what do we talk about? Cutting unemployment insurance benefits! The shadows gather around us, and we can bring the light, or we can be agents of the darkness. Because the shadows like these times of uncertainty. We start to doubt ourselves, and we start to doubt our friends, and we start to doubt the strangers around us. Does that person asking me for

money really need it? Are all those people who have been out of work for more than a year really looking for work? Do those people who can no longer afford their house payments really deserve a break when I have lived within my means? These all may seem like reasonable statements and questions to us. But we must recognize these feelings for what they are. They are the calls from the darkness. And dark as they are, darker still are the calls on the other side. Will I ever work again? What kind of a person loses her family's home? Perhaps the world would be better off without me.

But we can overcome these calls. Because the darkness does not understand the light that welcomes the hungry stranger and the stranded traveler and the homeless laborer as surely as its family and friends. Jesus showed us the way when he reached out to the adulterer and to the outcast, to the prisoner and the debtor. This was the light that the darkness could not understand. **It** cannot comprehend the love that knows no bounds, but Jesus does. Jesus knew that the darkness always starts at the margins, and it is from the margins that darkness always threatens to overwhelm us. So our light must shine brightest when the shadows are strong.

We have the opportunity to say, you are not broken because you have no work. You are welcome in our light and our warmth. You are not broken because you are losing your home. You are not broken because you could not save for retirement. We have the opportunity to say, come in out of the darkness of shame and fear. Jesus came on Christmas Eve to walk with all of us, and so you are our brothers and sisters. Let us, who see the light of Jesus Christ in the world, share it with those who feel as alone as Ebenezer Scrooge. So let us show welcome to those who must find help at the Shelter House and the Crisis Center, find food at the Free Lunch Program and Table to Table. And as we do, let us remember that it is dark outside, and that the darkness is trying to overcome us and will use its sweet words on us. But if we share Christ's light in the

world, if we believe in Christ's mission, if we have faith in what Jesus is, the light will grow brighter and keep the darkness at bay. We can look at the stranger and bring our shadows of doubt or we can show an unconditional love that the darkness does not understand. Jesus came to be the light for all people. We can share that light, or we can be alone in darkness. So let us live our faith bright like the noonday sun and say, Our light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.