

## **Light of the World in Darkness**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
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*I am indebted to my long time friend The Rev. Kirk Kubicek, an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Maryland, for some of the thoughts expressed in this sermon, and in particular for the story that concludes the sermon.*

I speak to you in the Name of Christ, the Light of the World, Amen.

Think how hard it is to find just the right word, even in an everyday situation, just the right word to express what it is you're thinking, or feeling. If we have trouble finding just the right word for everyday situations, think how much harder it must have been for the evangelists to find just the right word to express the deep mystery of who Jesus is. What we might call here, the Deep Mystery of Christmas. Each of the Gospel writers seeks his, or her, own word and tells the story in a different way.

In Mark, Jesus strides into the world a fully grown man, baptized by John the Baptist for a whirlwind year of ministry that will turn the world upside down. Matthew pushes Jesus' story further back. He traces Jesus' genealogy back to the first Jews, to Abraham and Sarah. Luke pushes the story even further back tracing Jesus' genealogy to Adam, the first human being. So Jesus becomes not only, not only the product of the history of the Jews, and belonging not only to the Jewish people, but a product of all the world's history and belonging to everyone.

Today we hear John grasping for just the right word to tell the story about who this Jesus is. In these eighteen verses, John pushes Jesus' heritage back, back before the first human beings, back before time itself, back before creation itself came to be. Did you catch those first words, in the beginning? Any Jew hearing those words, and I hop, any Christian hearing those words, hears an echo of the first words of the Bible. In the beginning when God began to create. And so today John pushes our understanding of Jesus back, deeper, into the darkness before there was anything. John asserts that Jesus' origins are awesome, truly cosmic, that they are the very taproot of the entire cosmos, of all that is, seen and unseen. John places Jesus' origins in that unimaginable time and place before there was any time or any place, before the Big Bang. There with God, beside God, in the heart of God, before God ever spoke all that has been and ever will be into being, there was the Word. Before God ever said, "Let there be light." John says that in the very heart of God there was a Word who was that Light. And then he says what is incomprehensible, he says that that light, that Word, finally came to dwell at a specific point in time in a specific man, Jesus. First the babe of Bethlehem, later the man of Nazareth; the teacher, the healer, the confronter of all demons and all evil, the one who feeds the world with His words, enlightening every soul that comes to Him and perhaps those who do not; finally giving His life to free them, to free us, to become inheritors, as Paul puts it, heirs of that light.

This Word, this Light, came to dwell among us, John says, to tabernacle among us, to set up His tent among us, as the Rector reminded us in her sermon of Christmas. Now perhaps you prefer Luke's words about Jesus with its manger scene, the angels, and the shepherds. Or perhaps you prefer Matthew's story with the wise men and their gifts, those stories that have spawned all the beautiful crèche scenes that grace our home, our lawns, and our stained glass windows. Luke's story and Matthew's story bring us joy and happiness each year and for many of us they capture the full essence of what we know and like about Christmas. These two stories are like two different lights that light up our homes, our trees and the very streets of our towns and city. They're glorious in their own way and full of a kind of happiness and joy that I love and would not rob you of. But let me ask you a question. Do shepherds and angels and wise men and their gifts, and the lights on our trees carry a strong enough light and speak a strong enough word to enlighten the darkness that John speaks about in this morning's Gospel. Do crèches and Christmas tree lights drive back the darkness that so many people feel so deeply at this time of year? Perhaps you've lost someone that you dearly loved this past year and are having to face Christmas and the New Year alone. Does a crèche and wise men push back that darkness? Or perhaps you carry the darkness of no job and none in clear sight or no love in your life. Or if you feel the darkness further away, maybe the darkness of Darfur pursues you where people are hunted down because of their tribal origins. And I suspect we are all haunted by the darkness of Iraq; the darkness of the insurgents and their unjust bombings of innocents; the darkness of our own unjust behavior in places like Abu Graib and the darkness of the swift and merciless execution of that man who was their terrifying dictator. Whatever darkness you face, does a crèche, do shepherds, do wise men shed enough light to drive back that darkness? For me they don't which is why I love John's story, because John wants to tell the story of a light that is coming into the world that can overpower all those seemingly overpowering darkness's. To overcome them, that Light becomes one of us, takes up residence here, tents among us. Jesus, God's definitive Word, God's unquenchable Light, decided to become one of us. To stand against the darkness, all darkness, all the ones I've mentioned and all the many more that afflict and darken our world. And yet more amazingly was the way in which He pitched His Light Tent among us. He didn't come in glitzy or powerful light as would be the ways of this world. He did not use the violent light of a Saddam Hussein, or the shock and awe of our armed forces to bring light. His coming was, as John points out, so subtle and unmanipulative, so seemingly powerless, so humble and simple that most of the world did not even know that He had come. Even those who followed Him had trouble seeing the Light that shone from Him. And even more trouble committing themselves to follow Him in the Way of the Light.

And so it is still with us today, isn't it? How hard it is for us to catch glimpses of this light in our darkness, and even harder to follow His gentle and yet powerfully persuasive way of being light instead of the more obvious and overpowering light ways of our world, the ones that use power over rather than power with. Jesus does not come as a Luke Skywalker, bearing a light saber. He is simply the blazing Light Himself. And in everything He says and everything He does, He works to enlighten everyone and heal and

feed and free and push back darkness wherever He finds it. And He goes on doing this whether we can see Him at work and join Him in it or not.

That is John's story of Christmas. But how do we capture it in words and images for our own day? In the end, of course, we cannot. Every story we will ever tell about Jesus will only catch a mere glimpse of His awesome Light. We keep grasping for images and words like light and glory to convey the awesome humility of God, coming among us, setting up His tent in our backyards, in Copley Square, in Darfur, in Iraq; to shed light in all those places and beyond. And yet, we must try to find our own words. We must try to find our own way to capture this story, so that it becomes our story and not just holy words in a dusty holy book.

As I struggled to find an image, a story for this coming of the Light, this coming of Jesus, a dear friend of mine, an Episcopal priest, a preacher in Baltimore sent me the story he was using this morning. So now I'm going to tell it to you as he told it to me, that old yet ever new story of Christ the Light coming into the world.

There were some Navy Seals sent to free a group of hostages in one of the dark corners of the world. As they stormed into the hiding place where those prisoners were being kept, they found hostages huddled on the floor in one corner of the room. The Seals tell them, "We're here to take you home, get up and follow us." No one moves. They are so damaged, so traumatized by the experience of their captivity, that they do not really believe that these people have been sent, sent to free them. So one of the Seals does something unimaginable, he takes off his helmet, puts down his gun, gets down on the floor, softens his face, huddles up next to the hostages, puts his arm around a few of them, something none of their guards would ever have done, and he whispers to them, "We are like you, we are here to be with you and to rescue you. Let us take you home, will you follow us?" One by one the prisoners get up and are eventually led to safety on an aircraft carrier and brought home. God sees us wrapped and trapped in many different darkness's, unwilling and sometimes literally unable simply to step away from those things that keep us in prison, often prisons of our own making. In Jesus, God takes off all His glory, gets down on the floor with us, huddles up heart to heart with us, and whispers, "Its ok, I am with you. I am one of you now and I understand how it is for you. Come with me, follow me and I will take you home. This is the Light, this is Christmas. Amen.