

Sermon on John 1:1-14
Christmas Day, December 25, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Just a few days ago we observed the Winter Solstice, on December 21 at 10:48 pm CST – the shortest day of the year. But actually, this is not quite true. The day was still 24 hours long, just as any other day! However, the daylight lasted only 8 hours, 46 minutes, the shortest amount of daylight all year, and the darkness lasted 15 hours and 14 minutes, more than any other. So the darkness has now overcome the light – and we are mostly living in the dark. But even now, the minutes of daylight are already increasing, so that by summer they actually overcome the hours of darkness (15 hours, 36 minutes of light, versus 8 hours, 24 minutes of darkness. But this will be a six-month journey.

Nobody likes to live in the dark – we are always seeking light (unless we're asleep). No wonder the ancients chose the winter solstice as a day to celebrate – because they knew that from then on the days would be getting longer. The ancient Romans celebrated a week-long Winter Solstice festival from December 17-24 and early in the third century the Emperor Aurelian declared December 25 as the Birthday of the Invincible Sun, a deity he wished to promote. Later that same century, early Christians chose this day for the celebration of Jesus' birth. It was only natural, as a symbol of how light was returning to bring the world out of its darkness, something to celebrate whether you are a believer or not.

In the ninth chapter of Isaiah, we read last night on Christmas Eve how *“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.”* In those days, the darkness came from the invading armies of the Assyrians, who had conquered the people, oppressed them and left them in desolation and anguish. But to those who had been living in darkness, a new light would shine. This was a poetic way to announce that a new king was coming, who would bring righteousness, joy and peace to the people. And this was the prophecy of Isaiah, who said:

“A child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!”

This morning we heard the gospel according to John describe the birth of Christ as the light of God shining in the darkness. It is a powerful symbol, to speak of Jesus as the light – we sing of this in many hymns and songs of praise. But this image recognizes that there is indeed darkness in the world, and we are all living in it – we need the light of God in Christ to shine, to set us free from the darkness.

So what is the darkness for you these days? Where do you find it? Maybe it's personal darkness – found in the disappointments and loss you have had in your life. Perhaps it is in fears about your health, or that of a loved one; a death in the family, or loss of a beloved friend. Living in darkness is how some describe depression. Darkness can come in times of loneliness, or our disconnection from other human beings. At this time of year, in addition to the literal darkness of this season, many live in the fog of disillusionment that comes from the pressure of these days – where joy and happiness may seem to be an expectation that we cannot fulfill. It can be multiplied by the materialism that mars the season of Christmas, replacing worship of the Christ child with the endless quest to get good deals on the elusive “perfect gift”, or purchase all those things that we don't need!

We also find the darkness on a global scale – the darkness in the world around us that causes so much suffering. We see darkness in the violence of our world, in pervasive poverty that afflicts our neighbors nearby as well as the poor across the world. We are also afflicted by the darkness of racism, the inequities, the unfairness found in our judicial, educational and economic systems, giving some of us privileges and leaving others out.

We see examples of the darkness in the prejudice shown against those who come (or seek to come) from foreign lands, or those who follow other gods or religions that we don't understand. We find darkness in the unwillingness to receive refugees fleeing from civil war, or to welcome immigrants who seek the same things that we and our families have sought. We see a lot of darkness in the present political campaign, where candidates seek votes by scapegoating immigrants, and blame whole populations and religions for the actions of a few extremists, in order to gain political power.

But the good news of Christmas is the proclamation that God has come as a light in the darkness of our world, in this child who was born to bring us life. So where do you see God's light in all of this? For that is the point, isn't it? To find hope and life in the message:

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son...”

So what does it mean “the Word became flesh?” Perhaps we become so used to hearing these words that we skip over how profound it is. One way to look at it is to consider God's purpose: how God becomes human so that we may see God. In the person of Christ. So God's Word of truth – is not as an “idea” or a “theology” or an “ideology” – but real FLESH AND BONES!

So we ask, how does God's Word then become REALITY in our world and in us? It happens when the truth, the aspirations, the hope we find in our faith are lived out in our daily lives! It happens when the compassion and kindness of God become a reality shown by human beings.

Perhaps we could make a list for when this happens: when driven by the compassion of Christ human beings share food with other hungry human beings, care for those who are sick, or comfort those who grieve. We see the reality of God's light shining among us when we witness people who counteract the darkness of our world by seeking the truth – instead of simply believing the lies at face value. When nations and individuals overcome their fears and welcome refugees from Syria into their homes. When churches open our doors to families experience emergency homelessness, and become their hosts, transforming church buildings into homes, as Christ would have us do. This is what makes love real.

So the power of God's light shining in the darkness is that it transforms us, through faith, from simply reacting to our fears, to seeking truth and working to become lights ourselves. God's light inspires us to imitate Jesus, who reached out to the sick and the suffering, offering healing, forgiveness and hope. God's light doesn't just shine for a moment on Christmas – although perhaps our attention is only drawn this one time per year. God's light shines on this shortest day of the year, in the midst of the winter's deepest darkness, and will continue to increase day by day, as we focus on this light in our own lives. The purpose of God's light in Christ Jesus is to be a beacon of hope for every one of us, a light that continues to shine, lighting our way, each and every day. For today is just a new beginning, a refocusing of our attention on the true light of God, to guide us in our work of love, of compassion, and peace.

So I close with Howard Thurman's poem "*The Work of Christmas*"- which speaks of the work of Christians – those who believe in Jesus Christ and follow him – which begins AFTER the celebration, the singing, and the feasting of this day is over. For the feast is not in itself the work – the feast is the celebration which inspires, nurtures, and sustains the faith which does the work of Christ.

The Work of Christmas – by Howard Thurman.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people,
To make music in the heart.*

Amen.