

Light and Life

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 26, 2010: The First Sunday after Christmas.
Based on John 1:1-18.*

Here we all are on this first Sunday after Christmas, which in this year's less-than-clergy-friendly calendar happens also to be the first day after Christmas. Welcome, if this is your first time here at St. Bart's. Welcome back if you've been here before or if, as is the case for some of us, it feels like you've never left.

I wonder how you're feeling on this morning after Christmas Day? Some of us may still be savoring the delights and visits and gifts of Christmas. Some of us may already be regretting over-eating, over-drinking, over-spending, over-staying—our own or others'. (But hey, that's how New Year's resolutions get born.) Some of us are Anglican, and we are both savoring and regretting.

Whether you've already pitched your Christmas tree out and vacuumed up the dried needles, or whether you've just put your tree up and are looking forward to decorating it and enjoying it over these twelve days of Christmas, today does feel different. Culturally, Christmas may be considered long over, except for the after-Christmas sales or, if you're going really green this year, turning your used Christmas tree into spruce butter, spruce oil or spruce vinegar. No kidding, recipes in the Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/25/opinion/25redzepi.html?src=me&oref=general>

Here at St. Bart's, the Christmas story lives on in the hearts of the hundreds of children who lived into that story here on Christmas Eve. But the donkey, the stable, the manger, the angel wings and the star have been put away to await the magic of next year's Christmas pageant. And yet, for us here in the Church, it's still Christmas. In fact, we're just getting warmed up! What better way to be both fully in Christmas and reflect today's different feel than by hearing a different kind of Christmas story from the Gospel According to John?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

No manger or star or baby here, but some of the most evocative poetry you'll ever hear, expressing a truth you may be living by, whether you realize it or not.

I'm guessing most of us know something about light and darkness. That knowledge starts early. Does anyone remember being afraid of the dark as a child? I do, and I confess to freaking out in utter darkness a few times even as an adult: when trapped deep in a cave; when alone in unfamiliar terrain at night in a place *not* like NYC, a place where it actually got pitch dark at night; when stranded on a stalled NJ Transit train beneath the Hudson River. The places were wildly different, but the darkness and my terror felt the same. In each of those times, what saved me was a small light, offered by a compassionate person: a flashlight lent by a fellow hiker, the dim light of a cell phone showing a faint path to be followed, a glow-stick fetched by a busy train conductor in the midst of an emergency.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. Even a small light can dispel a great darkness.

You may have seen the photos of "2010: The Year in Pictures" on The New York Times' website. [<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/photo/2010-year-in-pictures/>] Who can forget the images of those 33 miners in Chile trapped half a mile underground for 69 days? Those men knew darkness. Those men also knew light, light brought by the ceaseless efforts of those working to free them, and light brought equally by the messages of love and support from their families, and indeed the prayers and support sent from around the world.

Those miners, and likely all of us, know darkness, both external and internal, internal being no less real for being unseen. Health professionals assisting the miners worked deliberately to keep internal darkness at bay, too. Internal darkness can range from the shadows of depression, to the claustrophobia of anxiety, to the acridness of anger and bitterness. Darkness comes in many forms, and even when we don't go looking for it, sometimes it sneaks up on us.

Last week, in that final lead-up to Christmas, as expectations and pressure for Merry-ness rose higher and higher, I encountered some honest, courageous people who admitted being in a dark place. Two had just received serious, scary medical news. One lamented on Christmas Eve

his “fractured family.” One was afraid for her spouse’s health. Several are struggling bravely through their first Christmas without their loved ones who died this past year. They are all brave, and they all know darkness. I think somehow their honesty about being in a dark place becomes a light in that darkness.

There is no shortage of darkness, whether personal, interpersonal, on a community level or national level, or even on a global level. Those 97 photos from 2010 show darkness continuing beyond 2010: the effects of the earthquake in Haiti, war in multiple lands, eviction and foreclosure, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Yes, there may be plenty of darkness, but *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Light and Life will find us, even when we’re not open to them and don’t or can’t seek them for ourselves. Light and Life often come in humble, everyday forms, which—make no mistake—are every bit as powerful and effective as something more showy. Here’s where I’ve seen Light and Life coming into being these past few days: A woman volunteers to accompany her friend to her appointment with the surgeon. One spouse keeps vigil at the bedside of the other. A community of friends rallies to support one member in crisis. A man claps his friend on the back in wordless understanding and support. From the one whose serious medical diagnosis is still raw came truly remarkable words of hope and love and gratitude. Two families who used to be strangers are now connected, attending Christmas services together, their faces literally alight at the newfound relationships. A friend lost 30 years ago turns up and tentatively offers an olive branch. Four couples married at St. Bart’s several years ago send news of impending births (plural!).

And in these last few days around this place: music beautiful beyond words, preaching that touched the soul, always always always the children’s Carol Dance following the Christmas Pageant. Plus well over a hundred staff and volunteers working hard and well and cheerfully together to provide beauty and welcome so that all who enter these doors may experience Light and Life coming into being. And gratitude: *Wherever* you find gratitude, there you find Light and Life.

That’s my partial list, just for these past few days. Where do you experience Light and Life coming into being? Where do you sorely need Light and Life to find you?

It’s good to be reminded today that God doesn’t come into the world at Christmas; God has been in the world since before time, God is present and acting in the world now, and will be so past any boundaries of time we can invent. What we remember and celebrate at Christmas is God’s being present in the world in a new way: *the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.* Jesus came into the world to reveal God’s self to us in a way that had never been before.

Jesus the Christ continues to reveal God’s self to us, at Christmas time and beyond. Wherever you find Life and Light, God is being revealed to you. Wherever there is Light and Life, Hope is being born. Whenever Life and Light and Hope come into the world, God IS. And because God IS, Light will always ultimately overcome darkness, Life will always ultimately win over death, and Hope will continue to be born.

That’s what we celebrate at Christmas. Maybe we’ll celebrate enough to carry Christmas with us through the rest of the year. And if we’re not able to do that, not to worry: Light and Love and Hope will come looking for us. That’s how Christmas works.

So again, Merry Christmas, my friends. *Amen.*

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