

The Light Shines in the Darkness

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

1st Sunday after Christmas. December 30, 2007. (Text: John 1:1-18)

On this Sunday after Christmas, the last Sunday of 2007, I want to invite you to think with me about the beautiful and mysterious description of the Incarnation of the Son of God which we just heard from the opening verses of John's gospel. But before we do that, I want to call your attention to something that's been happening recently, something you know about but probably haven't paid much attention to. Since December 23rd, the days are getting longer. There's *more* light, *less* dark. The sun now sets a few seconds later every day. As of this past Thursday we had a full minute more sunlight than a week earlier. This isn't a big deal for us, but it's something our ancestors started noticing several thousand years ago, and it was a *very* big deal for them. Daylight beginning to overcome darkness was a cause for serious festivity a few thousand years ago.

That's why some clever bishop in the fourth century A.D. thought the Church ought to start celebrating the birth of Jesus at the time of the winter solstice. People were having parties then anyway, showing their delight that the darkness was not going to swallow up the sun, so the bishop figured this was the perfect time to get people thinking about Jesus, the Light of the World, rather than the pagan sun-god. He proposed a Scripture lesson to fit the occasion, and that brings us back to John's gospel because the lesson he chose comes from its first few verses: "*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.*"

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Those of you who are scientifically-minded know that what we call light is simply electromagnetic radiation visible to the human eye. Our unaided eyes can see this radiation within a certain range of wave lengths. (I won't bother you with the details, but if you had superhuman eyes your microwave oven would seem to glow.) If you have a cat, you have surely noticed that your cat has better eyes than you have. Cats see a broader range of the electromagnetic spectrum than humans do. Dogs, however, see even less light than we do, but we love 'em anyway. —Some of God's creatures are capable of seeing a whole lot of light; while others are capable of seeing only a little.

Here's the final scientific factoid I want to introduce, if you can put up with one more. You may have heard about "cosmic background radiation." That's the hum (or "background noise") that a super-sensitive radio antenna picks up even when every possible source of interference is eliminated. Physicists say this hum we can hear is lingering electromagnetic "light" from the "Big Bang," and it fills the universe. It's literally everywhere. —Of course, you've heard about the Big Bang, haven't you? I'm not a scientist, but the prevailing theory among them seems to be that the universe of what we'd call "stuff" — I mean galaxies, planets, atomic particles, and so forth — came fully into existence in its "raw" state with a gigantic explosion, the "Big Bang," about 13.7 billion years ago. — As a believing Christian, I call that The Moment of Creation. Here, physics agrees with Genesis where it tells us that the first thing God created was light: "*God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light.*" (That's Gen. 1:3.)

The Big Bang was the *first light* in the universe —and it was unimaginably bright. It was so bright that it still lingers throughout the universe. If we had the right sort of eyes, we could *see* it as well as hear it.

I hope you're beginning to see where I'm going with my little scientific detour. If your mind is already wandering to what you're going to do on New Year's Eve, then just chalk this sermon up to clergy holiday fatigue, and pray for something better next week!

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. I think there's a fascinating correspondence between the physical reality of the universe, the way modern science describes it, and the Gospel of John's mystical depiction of Christ, God's eternal Word, entering our world. John's is a very different sort of picture from Luke's heartwarming portrait of the herald angels, the amazed shepherds, the Virgin Mary, and the Holy Child laid to rest in a manger, watched over by protective Joseph.

We might compare them this way: Luke is trying to tell us "exactly what happened" – the way a modern TV news reporter might describe an event that took place yesterday in, say, Pakistan. John, however, is trying to tell us "what was really going on" in that event – the way a retired ambassador might do, who comes on the TV news to give in-depth commentary about the deeper *meaning* of the event in Pakistan that the reporter just described.

According to John's "in-depth commentary," the Son of God, who was God's agent in creation, "the unlimited One" whose energy fills the universe, descended from the dimension of Eternity *into* our dimension of limited existence, space and time. As the ancient words of the hymn we sang earlier put it: "*Rank on rank the host of heaven, spreads its vanguard on the way, as the Light of Light descendeth from the realms of endless day, that the powers of hell may vanish, as the darkness clears away.*"

In Christ, what had been unlimited accepted limitation. And what came into our mortal realm, in the Son of God, was Life itself, with a capital "L." That Life, "true Life," illuminates all people everywhere – the same way that the sun shines on everybody on earth. Or, as John put it, "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*" We believe Christ is the Truth and Wisdom of God which enlightens anyone, anywhere who is, indeed, "enlightened" —whether they ascribe their enlightenment to Christ or not.

And, like the cosmic background radiation which has been shining and filling the universe ever since the Big Bang, the Light of Christ is still shining, to drive away every kind of darkness in us—moral, spiritual, emotional, or intellectual. "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*" Another layer of meaning is revealed when we discover that there's another way to translate a key Greek word in that sentence. The alternative is: "*The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not UNDERSTOOD it.*"

That version also rings true, doesn't it? The Light of Christ shines in the dark places of this world, in the dark places of our human society, in the dark places of our own souls—but the darkness has not been able to grasp the deep meaning of the Light. The darkness cannot comprehend the Light. As John wrote, "*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.*"

The last thing I want us to look at is how these opening verses of the fourth gospel speak about the advance-man for Jesus, John the Baptist, the one who went ahead of him "to prepare the way." "*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*" I think those words apply to us, because our job is to be like John the Baptist. As people who believe in the Light of God which has come into the world, as those whose personal darkness has been transformed by that Light, our assignment is to be "witnesses to the Light." And we do that by *reflecting* the Light. Our job isn't mainly to instruct other people, teach them or advise them. Our role is to "reflect" the Light in a lot of different ways – in as many ways as we are different people – reflecting it into every nook and cranny of this dark world.

The great truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God is that the Unlimited One became limited for us. The infinite God became a finite human being in order to demonstrate the truth of his love for the world. God's Light and God's Truth are communicated most completely *not* by sermons like this one, or by learned lectures, or by books, but by *lives*—lives that reflect the Light. Lives like yours.