

Year C Christmas The Light of Christ John 1:1-14

We are, hopefully, familiar with the story of Christmas – that Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in a stable in Bethlehem because there was no room for them in the house. The angels proclaimed this wonderful news to a group of shepherds who then excitedly went to see for themselves, and worship this new-born King. The animals in the stable gathered around, curious about the human intrusion of a crying baby into their normally quiet night-time routine. So, the King of the world is born, God born a human to offer salvation to all humanity and he is greeted by smelly barnyard animals, rough around the edges shepherds – who were likely pretty smelly too – and his exhausted parents.

In the Gospel reading we just heard, John tells us this story all over again without even mentioning the stable, the animals, and the shepherds. John does something amazingly important with the story of Jesus' birth – John tells us why it matters to us. Our other Gospel story-tellers, Luke and Matthew, give us the details of the birth story – Mary and Joseph having little baby Jesus, the evil King Herod trying to kill Jesus because he's jealous of this new King, the wise men coming from distant lands to worship Jesus. John doesn't do this. John skips all that and goes for the gusto – with poetic grandeur, John tells us how the story of Jesus' birth so long ago in Bethlehem fits into the big picture...the Great Story of our Salvation. John tells us the whole story right at the beginning of his Gospel. He gives everything away – beginning, middle, and end – we know how the story turns out after hearing tonight's Gospel story. The rest of the book fills us in on the details.

What is the Story of our Salvation John tells us this evening and why is what we heard still so important to us today, so many years after John wrote it? Let's find out...

John tells us that in the beginning was the Word. His story doesn't begin with the birth of a child but with the birth of the cosmos. "In the beginning" takes listeners back to the beginning of our Story – to Genesis – when God was creating all things. It was God's Word that spoke all things into being... for example, God said, "let there be light, and there was light." God's Word brought light and life. John is unmistakably telling us that Jesus of Nazareth, born to Mary and Joseph, is God. Before there was anything else, there was God, and God created everything else.

In Genesis, we also learn a very important reason for why God creates. God is love and so creating is a part of God's love, an extension of God's love, the outpouring of God's love. God loves all of creation and wants us to love as well – not just to love God but to love and care for others, and to love and care for the world we call home. When all of creation loves each other and God, we will finally know the perfection God desires for us. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, shows us a vision of this perfection – humans living in harmony, caring for the animals, caring for the lush gardens that provide for their needs, and loving God. The last book of the bible, the Book of Revelation, once again shows us this vision of perfection – a transformed earth of peace and beauty where there will be no more tears, no sorrow, no sickness, no dying, where everyone once again lives in harmony with God and creation. All of the rest of the bible in between these two books tells us of our struggle – with God and sometimes against God – as God moves us toward the intended perfection.

Jesus is a part of that movement toward the intended perfection. God gave to us the gift of himself, of love – Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph in the stable in Bethlehem.

As God's love in the world, Jesus is described in today's Gospel, as light. Jesus is the light of the world. December is our darkest month of the year, dark and usually quite cold. The image of light – like a candle shining – on a dark, winter night brings up feelings of warmth, coziness, comfort, safety from the things in the dark that scare us, and we know that there will be people around that candle. Jesus is all of these wonderful feelings of comfort and warm relationship with others but Jesus – the love of God – is also much more than this.

Light reveals things – both good and bad. Suddenly flicking on a bright light can send little crawly critters scurrying for cover, can illuminate the dark-clothed thief climbing through your window, can throw cold water on a party getting out of control. And so, the love of God is not just the warm, fuzzy, snuggly kind of love. The love of God is the light that shines in the darkness so that nothing can hide from his light. Jesus, the light of the world, came to stir the pot – to shine his light on all that is wrong with our corrupt, oppressive systems that glorify power and wealth, on the people who participate in these systems, and on the people who suffer because of these systems.

Since we live in this world we are a part of the brokenness of this world. And Jesus' love shines on us, too, our good parts and our bad parts. We know we all are a little bit of lightness and a little bit of darkness. Some of the darkness is behaviours we have chosen – the mean words spoken about a friend when he wasn't there or the words we didn't speak to make amends. Some behaviours are bigger, more serious, and sometimes the way we've been brought up to think about certain groups of people and the ways of the world can bring darkness into our lives. Sometimes we even participate unknowingly in the world's darkness like buying a beautiful sweater that was made by underfed, underpaid girls in a far-off country. How on earth are

we supposed to be full of goodness when we sometimes don't even know we're participating in brokenness?

The good news to help us with this problem comes to us in the well-known passage of the bible, John 3:16, that tells us God did not give us the gift of love in order to condemn us, but to give us life – to save us from ourselves. The light that shines on us and the world may be uncomfortable, it may make us squirm, but it is still the light of love – a love that continuously invites us to be a part of the gift given to us, a love that transforms by bringing us into relationship with our God who is love.

John, tonight, spells out for us what this relationship is. He writes, "But to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God." Children of God – that's pretty darn amazing. The light of the world – the love of God – was not extinguished when Jesus physically left the earth so long ago.

Through the mystery of baptism, that light becomes our light. The priest pouring water over our heads, makes the sign of the cross on our foreheads and says, "you are marked as Christ's own forever" – a child of God.

But, as the saying goes, "With great power comes great responsibility." Because, John also tells us tonight that children of God are born of the will of God. And we know what the will of God is – perfection: All people, all creation living in love with each other and with God. What does that mean for us? It means that we can't think that because we believe in God that that is enough. If you look around at the world and think, "Where is God in all this mess?" well, look no further than yourself and the people in the pews around you. We bear the light of Christ and Jesus tells us what we are to do with the gift of love that we have been given: "let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven." Remember, too, that this light of love is not just the warm, fuzzy type. It is

the stir the pot type, the shine the light on the brokenness in order to transform it type of love, the bring others into relationship type of love.

There is so much darkness still in our world that it can feel impossible for us to shine a light on it all, to transform it all. We turn again to Jesus for the answer to this. Throughout his life, Jesus did not write a book to tell us about his life, he did not build any buildings for us to gather in. What he did was gather people, he built a community. He gathered disciples around him – disciples who were to learn his way of love and then live his way of love. The disciples were to reveal this life of love – the perfection of life in God's kingdom – to the world. And the plural of disciple is church.

Jesus gathers us to him so that we can learn his way of love and then live his way of love in order to reveal God's kingdom to the world. Together as the church – the Body of Christ in the world – we can accomplish more than we can alone. And we do not do it alone, we do it bearing Christ – the light of God's love. Each of our lights shining God's love in the darkness are much brighter than one light. And, as we will say together later in the service, this light we bear can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

We are given the gift of love this Christmas – a gift that is ours to open or not. But, when we open it, we open it in order to share it with the world. We carry the light of Christ's love into the world and, as John tells us, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.