

“The Light That Will Not Go Out”

Date: January 7, 2007
Text: John 1: 1-5; 10-18

I have shared in Christmas Eve candle lighting services for many years but the experience never fails to make a deep impression. The worship center is dark, the candles are all lit, people are singing “Silent Night, Holy Night” and then the powerful words of scripture are spoken: **“THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS AND THE DARKNESS NEVER SHALL OVERCOME IT.”** Doesn’t that stir something within you?

Christmas Eve may be fading into the background and some of the luster of that experience may have begun to wear off as we move into the New Year. It doesn’t take long for the so-called “normal stresses of everyday living” to bring us back down to earth. Indeed, our subconscious might be asking: “Does that Light really shine all year?”

There is no question about the darkness and the fear and anxiety that it brings. Don’t we all know someone who is going through a very tough time because of illness or family situation and it seems almost overwhelming? It would be easy to go on and on about what is wrong with our world. Most people are pretty good when it comes to talking about personal ills or the violence in our streets, family abuse and the wars in the Middle East but in the midst of all that is awry always we re driven back to this fundamental question: where is the Light?

Are we not asking a much deeper question when we discuss the symbolism of “light and darkness?” Are we not asking what part God is playing in our world as we enter a New Year? Is there something upon which to build our lives, a solid foundation, or are we truly adrift? Many years ago during a family gathering I was playing with our three year-old granddaughter in the playroom. She started to ask me, as three year-olds are apt to do, a whole bunch of questions about Jesus. One of which was, why did people want to kill him? I tried to bring down to her level the whole idea that the purpose of Jesus’ life when he grew up would be to help people return to living God’s way and some people didn’t like that. Right away, I knew I was in trouble because I could see a little twinkle in her eyes and she responded with the question that 3 year-olds love to ask: “Who is God?” Adults were conversing in the next room but suddenly the conversation ceased and I could tell that the rest of the family was glad they were in the other room.

I thought back to that conversation when reading our morning lesson. Implicit is the idea, as expressed in the Letter of John later in the New Testament, that “No one has ever seen God. It is Jesus, God’s only son, who is close to the Father’s heart who has made him known.” I could have talked to my granddaughter about the nature of God but it is much easier to begin with the adult life, death and resurrection of that babe in a manger. **“The Word became flesh.”** Such powerful words which express an everlasting truth: If you want to know about the nature of God, Christ helps to open the door. In Christ, we begin to get a feel for our Maker who is more than just the Creator of winter storms and bright sunrises. Now that the celebration is over we need to look at what it means and there can be no better guide than the words of John I: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Theologians speak of this as the Incarnation, a key statement about the meaning and purpose of the child from Bethlehem.

In preparing for this sermon among my many notes was one that said, “Jesus brings life.” I originally thought to myself in looking at that note, “No, I meant to say that Jesus brings light,” but then I realized that Jesus actually does both. As the “Light of the World,” Jesus brings new meaning to daily living. Jesus says in another favorite passage of mine from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John, “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” Our faith is all about “abundant living.” Fortunately the early Church had the wisdom to recognize that this message needed time to sink in and so they set aside the twelve days after Christmas to emphasize the manifestation of the Light or what is called “Epiphany.” Thus as we stand at the brink of a new year, in the middle of the darkest part of the year, we affirm that the Light continues to shine and that all our hopes and fears can truly be met as the Babe from Bethlehem grows up.

Today in the church calendar actually two significant events are celebrated: the coming of the wise men but also later in the gospel story Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan. I was pleased that we could share in the

baptism of Ella Carlson this morning as a reminder of how important the sacrament is in our lives. The first thing Jesus did after that crucial moment at the age thirty was to start his ministry by developing a cadre of friends or followers who would carry the Light into the future. As 2007 begins, we as Jesus' friends are challenged to make sure that the Light continues to glow in all the dark places of human existence, physical, emotional and spiritual. And we need to think as our annual meeting approaches, how we as a community of faith can be very serious and intentional in making sure that what we do in ministry is centered upon making the Light shine more brightly. Many of us are familiar with mission statements and probably have drafted more than we wish. We don't need to spend a lot of time at First Presbyterian forming committees and talking endlessly about what we are going to do, a typical Presbyterian activity, but we need to be very clear that our actions are all focused on making the Living Christ a part of our lives and that of others. We need to be clear that what we do we do in his name. That's the challenge: the Light is there but Jesus' friends need to make sure that it continues to be seen like the tower of this "church right on the corner of Main St."

Lots of people get calendars for the New Year. I saw a slogan on one a few years ago that has stuck with me: "When you jump for joy, be careful that no one moves the ground beneath your feet." Think about that phrase. It's pretty hard to find solid footing in our kind of world, isn't it? You think you are getting ahead financially and some big expense occurs. Your job seems secure and then the company is sold. Feeling good and the flu comes along. Where can we find a solid foundation upon which to base our lives? As we start this New Year, we need to be aware that no one, not anything, can move the ground if the foundation of our lives be what Paul Tillich called "The Ultimate Ground of Being." None of us knows exactly what lies ahead but we can be assured that a Light has come into the world that will never go out.

A former Yale Seminary professor told this story about the Christmas rush. He bumped into a woman during the crowds and confusion of holiday shopping. Her packages went tumbling. He tried to help her and apologized profusely. The woman answered, "Oh, I hate Christmas anyhow. It turns everything upside down." To which the professor quickly replied, "That is just what it was made for."

May the birth of this child and all that he did when he grew up continue "to turn your world and mine upside down."