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## *Light, Darkness, and Incarnation*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins**  
**Christmas 1 – Year A**

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.

I bid each of you good morning and a heartfelt welcome to the Cathedral on this first Sunday after Christmas! Just a few days ago, on Tuesday night, we heard the lovely narrative from the Gospel of Luke, telling us of the earthly origins of Jesus in the form of the birth and infancy narratives of which we are all so fond. The Gospel of John, in contrast, does not include an account of the birth of Christ as do Luke and Matthew, who are ever the storytellers. They charm us with angels and shepherds, a virgin birth in a stable, a villain named Herod, and heroes in the form of peripatetic kings.

John, who is more of a theologian, gives us in these first 18 verses pure poetry in the form of a lovely Christological hymn and a dazzling, paradoxical theological and astronomical conundrum: *the light by which everyone sees came into the world, yet the world did not see it*. Our culture sometimes bears this out. Last year a friend of mine made his way to a local store on Christmas Eve to get a couple of strings of new lights for an unexpectedly tall tree, and an extra stocking-stuffer or two. The employees were already pulling down the Christmas displays and decorations. My colleague asked one harried, soon-to-be former elf about this seemingly hasty dismantling, and he said *“When this place closes in an hour or two, Christmas is over.”*

My Methodist next door neighbor, who delights in what I call my Epiphany burning bush, teases me every year when I celebrate the 12 days of Christmas—*beginning* with Christmas Day—with additional lights lovingly placed on the humble boxwood in my front yard. I suspect even the Chickadees at my feeder think I am bit nutty. Begging the question, is John right in saying that the light came into the world, and the world did not see it? Does that include us? Do we sometimes miss the little miracles of light right in front of us? John tells us that the Word became flesh in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word that is the source of light and life for the world—and the innate goodness of creation is made manifest in this light...this life...this Word made flesh. So, John is not concerned with the *birth narrative* of Jesus so much as with the cosmic dimension of the *always already there* Word of God, made manifest in the birth of Christ. Indeed, in verse 14 we find the consummate expression of John's Christology: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* The Logos—the Word—became part of human history and dwells—the literal translation is *“pitches a tent”*—among us, even now. From this fullness—this abundance—we have all received grace upon grace. Yet, John cautions us that this light came into the world unperceived. What are we to do with this paradox?

Perhaps John is holding up a mirror which reflects the true nature of faith—and the gratitude for the fruitful tension that comes with it. This year, on a night just before the winter solstice, my running buddies and I ventured once again into the darkness of the trail, with our headlamps lighting the way until we reached a place we affectionately call “Beech Cove.” Deep in the woods, alongside a lovely brook, we turned off our headlamps and let the darkness settle in around us. The water, flowing down and over the stones in the stream, could be heard in a new way, and Orion and the Pleiades became visible above us. Wendell Berry, our American treasure, wrote this about the dark: *“To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet, and dark wings.”* Anyone who has spent time in the woods at night will know the truth of this poem, and its paradoxical lesson that we know the light, in part, because we are willing to become familiar with the dark. And, sometimes we know the dark by virtue of the fact that we are human, and vulnerable, and in spite of this, amid our darkest moments, we see glimpses of light. As the poet Szymborska says about the soul,

Joy and sorrow  
aren't two different feelings for it.  
It attends us  
only when the two are joined.

This paradoxical relationship between darkness and light is exactly where the Gospels of John and Luke speak to one another, in dialectic fashion perhaps. The incarnation we observe and celebrate in this season means nothing less than that God is no longer a God of the sky, relegated to Orion's realm, but rather walks in the rhythm of humanity. Now, in Christ, we can gaze upon God, both human and divine, just as light—the Word—is both particle and wave, and in seeing Him we see who we were meant to be. Despite the sometimes self-indulgent crassness of the season, are there not times when we can see glimpses of our own best selves reflected in the glimpses of light that we can barely make out? We are reminded of W.H. Auden's similarly paradoxical Christmas Oratorio in which he wrote: *"To those who have seen the child, however dimly, however incredulously, The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all...we look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit our self-reflection."* This being human can be so very hard, until we remember that we are held in the hands of a God who has chosen—and is still choosing—not to leave us alone. Once we really, deeply believe this, we will never be the same. As Richard Rohr has said so well, *"The traditional understanding of the Incarnation is that the Person of Christ subsists in two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. Without ceasing to be God, the Word becomes human. And without ceasing to be incarnate as a human being, this Person is divine. It seems impossible, but this is what Christians claim we believe. . . . Indeed, we could never have proposed such a thought to ourselves if we had not sensed its reality in ourselves. We do not pretend to understand the Incarnation in an analytical abstract way. We rather understand it in an experiential way. We know what it means because we resonate with it in our own being. Whatever meaning it has for us comes from the deepest level of our sense of our own reality. . . . What is true in Jesus is true in us!"* Creativity itself is what's evolving in the cosmos, and we are in a position to realize ourselves as incarnate divine creativity. This has two effects. It makes the whole journey intensely meaningful. We are part of this, creative contributors to this. And this is the other effect: we bear some responsibility. We have to take our part in the work. We, for instance, are now in a position to do something about all the suffering. We are agents within the system and can have causal effects on other parts of the system. We have intelligence, we have empathy and capacity to feel for others and to care about them, and we even have insight into the Spirit present in every being and calling dignity and respect. *Because of our inherent dignity as children of God, we are empowered and called, like Jesus was, to create a more loving and compassionate world. Responding to this divine invitation might be the ultimate gift we could offer back to God this Christmas season. Richard Rohr says "I hope you've met at least one "Kingdom person" in your life. They are surrendered and trustful people. You sense that their life is okay at the core. They have given control to Another and are at peace, which paradoxically allows them to calmly be in control. A Kingdom person lives for what matters, for life in its deepest and lasting sense."* For Rohr, there's a kind of gentle absolutism about their lifestyle, an inner freedom to do what they have to do—joyfully. Kingdom people feel like grounded yet spacious people at the same time, the best of the conservative and the best of the progressive types in the same body. Kingdom people are anchored by their awareness of God's love deep within them and deep within everyone else, too. They happily live on a level playing field, where God has come to *"pitch his tent"* among all of us. And in so doing we become the Body of Christ in the world. Being the Body of Christ in the world is our Incarnational calling. It is not a matter of either/or. Rather, it is both...and...darkness and light, suffering and compassion, loving, and being loved...when we allow Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, to pitch his tent in our heart, it transforms us in mind, body, and yes, spirit. One of my heroes, Donald Winnicott, once prayed, "O God, my prayer is that I will be fully alive when I die." We are most fully alive when we are giving of ourselves, experientially, Incarnationally, and in so doing respecting the dignity of every human being. That is an Incarnation of the Word made Flesh we can, literally, all live with. Amen.