
Light Amidst Darkness

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Christmas I – Year C

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

I bid each of you good morning, a Happy New Year, and a heartfelt welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this first Sunday after Christmas. We are reminded this week from the lyrical Gospel of John that we can sometimes miss the true light among us, even in the midst of a season of light, and for some, that season is already done. 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 it, 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. But we do seek to live out the 12 days of Christmas on into Epiphany—next Sunday.

Begging the question, however, is John right in saying that the light came into the world, and the world did not see it? Does that include 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 *always already there* Word of God, made manifest in the birth of Christ.

John, in his paradoxical insistence that the world cannot see the light which supposedly enlightens it, would not deny that even our unknowing, at times uncaring world sees glimpses of the light. 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 chose not to leave us alone.

Several years ago I was serving a small parish tucked away the mountains of north Georgia. I was by then teaching full-time, and very early each Sunday morning Vicky and I would make our way up I-575 to this wonderful place—this Holy Family parish—where I began my formal journey into the priesthood. The people there were and remain warm, and gracious, and forgiving of my rookie mistakes, my awkwardness with the liturgy, and my efforts to find my voice in the pulpit. They were, and remain, a grace-filled blessing for us. On that particular Christmas Eve I arrived mid-afternoon to prepare for the 4:00 pageant. And, that year—some 20 years ago now—winter came early, and stayed long. As I drove north the radio was replete with warnings about freezing rain, sleet, and snow. The second service that evening was to have been an ecumenical effort, with our parish hosting the choirs of the local Lutheran and Catholic churches and by late afternoon both had canceled for fear of driving the icy mountain roads.

Shortly after I arrived, amidst the excitement of the preparations for the services to come, a parishioner mentioned to me

that his father lay dying in the local county hospital, and asked me to pray for him, and for his family. I gave him a hug, told him I was sorry, and that I would remember his father in my prayers. And then I was swept up in the services that continued through the evening, and ended with the midnight Eucharist as a sleety rain fell steadily outside, the wind blowing the ice against the lovely glass and beams of the nave. The weather continued to worsen, and I began to wonder if I would be able to make the drive back home where my family waited, having attended services closer to home on that wintry night. By midnight the sleet could be heard against the windows as Luke's Gospel was read, and the light indeed shone in the darkness of this deep December winter night. After the final service of the night I walked out into the storm, and, perhaps foolishly, decided to try to make it home. I wanted to be with Vicky and the boys to celebrate Christmas with them the next morning, and I wanted to sleep in my own bed.

Slowly, I made my way from the church into town. As I came to the intersection that would take me out to the highway and home, the light turned red, and as I applied my brakes I slid on the ice midway into the abandoned intersection, my car, now pointing left, to the east, and my right-hand turn signal blinking on and off, keeping time with my windshield wipers in the frozen darkness of that darkened town. And, sitting thus askance in the middle of the road, my blinker now meaninglessly indicating a right-hand turn, I remembered my parishioner's father, lying in the hospital down the road to the left.

So, I turned left. A couple of miles down the two-lane road lay the old county hospital, aging and almost defunct, with a newer, much larger facility now under construction just down the highway, towards Atlanta. I made my way up the icy steps to the lobby, where a pitiful Christmas tree, now bereft of most if its needles, worthy of Charlie Brown, sat forlornly on an institutional metal table, bending beneath the weight of too many decorations and wrapped Christmas packages I suspected to have been empty. The reception desk was abandoned, and I paused at an intersection of four hospital corridors leading off like spokes on a wheel, or like being at the center of a cross. Choosing one corridor, I walked halfway, about to turn around, when a nurse appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and said "*You must be here to see Mr. Lewis.*" "Yes. I am," I said, wondering how she could have known. "This way," she said, leading me to a single room where a man lay amidst a tangle of tubes and wires, on a respirator, clearly near death. I turned to ask the nurse about this, and she was nowhere to be found. Carefully, I made my way into the room, and stood for a moment beside the bed. Suddenly I felt very tired, and out of place. I did not know this man—had never laid eyes on him until this moment—and I had only a passing acquaintance with his son, my parishioner, whose comment earlier in the evening somehow, mysteriously, led me here. I did not know what to do, or say. I pause here to remind myself, and all of us, that I was by now a professor of pastoral care—the irony of which did not escape me in that moment—but I felt lost, without a light to guide me. I was in the dark. I said a perfunctory silent prayer—I had thoughtlessly left my Prayer Book in the car—and I turned around and left the room. I wanted to go home. About half-way down the hall I heard the nurse call out behind me. "*You probably already know this,*" she said, "*but the last sense we lose before we die is the ability to hear. I just thought you would want know...If you didn't already know...which you probably did.*" And then she disappeared into another room. I stood there for a moment, feeling foolish, but somehow emboldened; encouraged; enthused...somehow hopeful.

And I went back down the hall and into Mr. Lewis' room. This time, I made my way into the tangle of wires and tubes, cleared a path, sat on the bed, and took his hands in mine. And I prayed out loud, in a clear voice. I asked God to shepherd this man's transition home, and to welcome him there, and to bless his passing and be with those who loved him, and to comfort them. And I told him that God was with him, and would not leave him, ever, no matter what. And I sat there for a while, listening to the sleet hitting the windows and the respirator, assisting this man with his dying breaths, and the sound of my own breathing, coming easier to me now. And then I went home. Before I left, I tried to find the Christmas angel so cleverly disguised as a nurse, and I could not find her. Where had she gone? Had she been there at all? Had I conjured her in my own weariness and confusion? Could this dying man hear me? I do not know. But I do know this; the light of the forlorn Christmas tree in the lobby of that old hospital has stayed with me, and reminds me that the Word on that evening penetrated even the darkness of my inadequate, hesitant, finite, and all too human brokenness. Grace. That's the word. Sometimes, in the darkness, despite ourselves, we catch a glimpse of it...and of the light from which it comes.

God became like us, so that we know God, and God might fully and completely know us...our experience, including our hesitant, uncertain efforts to bear that light into darkness. Jesus risked the vulnerability of becoming human, and in so doing now takes on all the frailties and finitude of flesh-and-blood humanity. Each human soul, my sisters and brothers, is sacred and unique, and Christ dwells there, too, for as Galatians reminds us, *we have received adoption as children*. Christ has found a home in each of us—has made a home for each us—has welcomed each of us home as his adopted children in the particularity of our being, the sacred landscape of our souls. As our collect for today puts it, *God has poured upon us the*

new light of God's Incarnate Word. Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives. Amen.

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