

For the people of St. Philip's  
Christmas Eve  
John 1: 1-14  
Maria Hoecker , preacher  
"Illuminations"

I have heard it said that the first chapter of John's Gospel has inspired more sermons than any other chapter of the Bible. This doesn't surprise me. John's Gospel begins with powerful, poetic words that make us think about who God is and what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ. They are majestic words-words that echo the creation story in Genesis, "In the beginning?." There are words here that speak about eternity and the life of the world and the light of all people. Good words. Strong words. Pure poetry. Words that are beautiful, but also words that are difficult to pin down. These are the kind of words that for centuries have called people to write books that wrestle with their meaning. These are words that beckon us to dive deeper into an intriguing mystery.

Take, for example, verse five in today's text: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This is not a simple piece of Scripture. I struggle with these words because they do not say what I want them to say. I want them to declare that when the light comes into the world it *obliterates* the darkness. It takes the bleak mid-winter with every sadness, every despair, every raw deal, every horrendous tragedy, every evil plan, every god-awful, life-sucking disease, and tosses the whole mess into the cosmic trash bin. I want the light to arrive and to win, and I want it to win big. I mean I want the light to deal with the darkness in a way that is so overwhelming, so completely devastating, that I can switch channels at half-time because there is no way, no possible way, that the darkness is even going to come out of the locker room to play the third quarter.

Instead of total victory, we get something much more "modest" in John's Gospel. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not extinguish it. The darkness was not able-at least, not immediately-to reach over and pinch out the flickering wick of the light. Or, if you prefer the King James translation, "the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." Huh? The light came. The darkness looked up and saw it and thought, "Hm, I don't get it. I don't understand what this light-this candle for the world, this hope for all people-is all about. Well, I guess I'll just go back to being the darkness, being that which drags humanity down, that which nibbles at the edges of people's fractured souls, that which sneaks up on people to devastate them when they least expect it." "The Word of God came," says John. It came, and when the darkness saw it (the word, life, the light), it shrugged its shoulders and went back to work.

Now, while I may not like the perspective on the light given by this text, I do have to admit that it strikes me as being true. In the 2,000 years that have unfolded since that night in Bethlehem, can anyone argue that the darkness has diminished? Is there any less pain, any less meanness in the human spirit, any less heartache? If anything, there is more-more suffering, more nastiness, more agony, because there are more people, lots more vulnerable souls for the darkness to damage. In fact, there is so much suffering that it may seem as if the darkness has already won... that its victory is assured. And isn't that the case? In the end, isn't that the lot for us all? Darkness.

Scott Johnson, a Presbyterian pastor and professor from Atlanta GA, tells a story about a student who was preparing a lesson plan on the ninth chapter of Isaiah. It is a chapter that we often read during Advent, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined." As part of her research into this passage, a student decided to try and find the darkest place on campus. After hunting around, she discovered a little-used racket ball court in the basement of the McMillan classroom building. It was accessed only by going down two flights of steps and through a few heavy doors. A good portion of the court was probably underground. This enterprising student discovered that when you got inside and closed the door and turned out the lights, it was really dark in there. There wasn't a single stray

photon bouncing around that could make an impression on a human retina. It was, she said, totally dark. Scary dark.

When it came time for this student to lead her class through the lesson, she brought them down the stairs, through the doors, and sat them down around the edges of the court. Then she said, "You are people who live in a land of deep darkness." And she turned out the light. A few students gasped. Then it got pretty quiet. She waited. In the hush and in the dark, they sat. They sat and waited. After five minutes, five surprisingly long, silent, and absolutely dark minutes, she read the words, "Those who lived in a land of deep darkness-on them light has shined." With those words she struck a match and lit a small candle. Now, as I understand it, by no means did that small candle fill the vast room with light, but all the same it changed things. It changed them radically. With the flickering of the light, people saw themselves, and they saw each other. They saw faces-surprised faces, puzzled faces, and even a couple of faces streaked with tears. For those in deep darkness, a little light made all the difference, all the difference in the world.

"The light shines in the darkness," writes John. Maybe that's the thing. Maybe that's the gospel writer's point. It is not that the light of Jesus Christ obliterates the darkness; it is simply that the Light is there. This is the message of the Incarnation-the story behind the story that we tell each other this day.

God enters into the darkness to sit alongside of us.

God refuses to dwell in the heavens above and from a safe distance watch the drama of human life play out.

God, through Jesus Christ, knows pain- knows loss- knows death -- knows new life that springs out of death.

In all places at all times, God climbs right into the darkest places to be with us; and in that holy and luminous action, we find reason enough to hope that we will find our way through the darkness. Love lights our path.

God's enduring love is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it." John's Gospel is clear. The darkness is not an illusion. It is there. It is real. We are always and ever in a battle with it. But we are not alone. The blessing of God almighty is solidarity through the Body of Christ. It is presence by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's love is the light coming to be with us.

It is my heartfelt prayer this evening that all of you will experience the deep truth of God's Word as we approach this feast of the nativity. May you be blessed this day and every day of your lives with the true, ending light. May you take comfort in knowing that, whatever dim shadows surround you at this hour, God is rushing o to be with you, to light a candle that the darkness cannot overcome.

Amen.

(source for sermon: The Rev. Dr. Scott Johnson)