

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 25, 2017 (Christmas Day)*

John's gospel would make a lousy Christmas pageant. No swaddling clothes or mangers. No sign of Mary and Joseph. No wise men or shepherds. It's pretty much just the Word of God and a bunch of light.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

It's beautiful and poetic, but what's a pageant director supposed to do with *that*? You could have a kid shining a flashlight around, I guess. And another one dressed up as the Word of God wearing a costume with a big W on it. But the whole scene just doesn't make for a compelling visual.

Which is one of the reasons I so love being in church on Christmas Day. After the pageants and the pageantry of Christmas Eve, we are left to contemplate all that has taken place. With bits of tinsel still on the rug and wax drippings still on the pews and perhaps a hint of incense still in the air, we are left to reflect upon what God has wrought in sending his Son into the world. There is a more cerebral approach to the meaning of the incarnational event that took place in a stable in Bethlehem a couple thousand years ago.

Despite our preference for hand-carved nativity sets with figurines placed just so on our mantle-places, God entering the world in human form was a messy affair. As you would expect from a birth taking place among farm animals. The chaos of Christmas pageants hints at this. And it's an important part of the Christmas story and our annual devotions. But so is zooming out and reflecting on the cosmic meaning of the events that are such beloved aspects of the Christmas experience.

This morning, as we take a step back from the manger, perhaps having left wads of wrapping paper on the living room floor, I want to focus particularly on the image of light. Light is a major theme in John's gospel and it is indelibly intertwined with his theology of Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one of God. John boldly proclaims that Jesus is the light of the world. In these first few paragraphs alone John calls Jesus the “light of all people,” the “true light,” and tells us that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

But first, let's acknowledge that the image of light and dark just isn't as powerful as it used to be. Despite the sun setting before 4:30 these past few weeks — which is rather depressing, frankly — it's easy enough to take light for granted in our modern world. If we want light, we flick a switch and behold! Let there be light! When the sun goes down there are streetlights and

headlights and exterior lights and, if we're fumbling around for our keys, flashlights on our cell phones. We basically have the power to turn night into day if need be and we are rarely ever inextricably cast into a darkness that we cannot illuminate.

So at first glance, John's image of the light coming into the darkness of the world loses something in translation. It's nearly impossible for us to imagine what it was really like before the advent of electricity. Trying to get everything done before nightfall. Getting lost in the woods on a dark night. Reading by candlelight.

But even though we can't necessarily relate to the primal interplay between light and dark, we can very much relate to metaphorical darkness. To the forces of darkness that are unleashed upon the world in the form of bigotry and hatred and violence. That kind of darkness is alive and well and terrifying. It is this darkness that cannot overcome the light of Christ. The light of Jesus Christ that entered the world can never be extinguished. And that's what Christmas is all about. This light that shines in the darkness is the light of hope.

And if there is anything we could use right now, if there is anything we crave, it is hope. The hope that justice will prevail; the hope that our lives have purpose and meaning; the hope that darkness will be driven out.

This is the thing about light. It dispels darkness and illuminates truth. It makes visible that which was previously obscured. When hope — that beautiful life-giving emotion — is hidden by the cares and occupations of our lives, we live a dimmed existence. All that is lovely and holy is hidden from our eyes. When we allow the light of Christ to shine forth, joy flows abundantly, bursting through the darkness. This is hope. The recognition that even amid darkness, the light of Christ will prevail.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor who could not abide the song, "This Little Light of Mine." Annoying tune aside, he insisted it was heretical. When the subject of the song came up, he would proclaim with righteous indignation to anyone who would listen, "This light is neither *little*, nor *yours*." He was right, of course. The Light of Christ is the greatest light the world has ever known. And we do not own it or control it. On our best days, we stand in its warm glow, experience it, and share it with others. This light that entered the world in the form of Jesus changed everything. And it is by this light that our lives are defined and illuminated.

That's the reminder for us on Christmas. So often we focus on the darkness of this world — the fear, the violence, the injustice — and fail to see the light in our midst. The light that stands in contrast to the darkness; the light that illuminates the dark corners of our hearts and souls. On Christmas Day we testify to this light; we give thanks for its never-ending presence in our lives; and we revel in the Light of Christ that sustains us with peace, hope, and joy.