



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
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Merry Christmas!

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
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St. Anne's Parish
The Church in the Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Merry Christmas! On this beautiful Christmas Day, we gather once again to hear the story of Christmas, to pause and wonder at the mystery of God pouring out upon us the new light of his incarnate Word, the light that continues to shine in the darkness. The Christmas story has been told “many times, many ways” to quote Bing Crosby. On this day, I invite you to hear this story once again as a story about the light that shines in the darkness. In the soaring words of our Gospel lesson, we hear this great Christmas truth: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” This life and light that we celebrate in the birth of Christ still shines today and we pray “that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives.”

The story of the birth of Christ is a story filled with images of light shining in the darkness. Isaiah says, “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.” In Matthew’s story of birth of Christ, we hear of the star that shines in the night sky and leads the wise men to the place of Jesus’ birth. The story from Luke’s gospel is also filled with images of the light shining in the darkness. Think of the shepherds, who were in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, and then suddenly the whole night sky is illuminated by the glory of God. As Luke says, “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’” And from our Gospel lesson for today, we hear that “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” and “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness,

and the darkness did not overcome it.” The story of Christmas is filled with light: and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

The interplay between light and darkness seems to define so much of our human experience. Think of the symbol of darkness. It is associated with things like blindness, night, cold, gloom, despair, lostness, chaos, danger, and death. Darkness is a powerful symbol of much of the human condition. The symbol of light, on the other hand, is the antidote to darkness. Light is associated with things like sight, hope, finding one’s way, safety, warmth, and life. The good news of Christmas, really the good news of the Christian faith, is that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. As Martin Luther King, Jr. writes, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” In the story of the birth of Christ, we celebrate the light of God which shines in the darkness; the love of God which is the hope and the destiny of the world.

Light has always been a powerful symbol of God. At the very end of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, he speaks of the vision of God, the beatific vision, and he describes God as the “Eternal Light.” He writes, “I remember that my vision bore the intensity of the divine ray until it joined Infinite Being and Goodness itself. Ah, overflowing grace through which I could presume to fix my gaze on the Eternal Light so fully that I used up all my sight.” *Ah, overflowing grace through which I could presume to fix my gaze on the Eternal Light so fully that I used up all my sight.* What a wonderful image! What a wonderful hope! To fix our gaze upon the Eternal Light so fully that we use up all our sight. It would be heaven indeed!

And, yet, the great truth of Christmas is that the Light of God infuses and energizes the whole universe, it is, as Dante says, the love that moves the sun and the other stars. God’s light and God’s love are animating, energizing, and illuminating all things. The Eternal Light is shining forth all around us if we would but have eyes to see. The great spiritual writer Thomas Merton once spoke of a vision of God’s light shining forth on the city streets of Louisville, Kentucky. Merton writes, “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm, now that I realize who we really are. If only everybody could understand this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.

The extraordinary claim of Christmas is that this light, this love which moves the sun and the other stars became flesh and dwelt among us. Our Gospel speaks of the Word that was with God and that was God becoming flesh and living among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s son, full of grace and truth. The Eternal Light, the Love that moves the sun and the other stars, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory in Christ. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

But even if we know Christ as the true light that came into the world, the light that shines in the darkness, we also know that there is still darkness in the world. Sometimes we lose sight of the light and get lost in the darkness. Theodore Parker Ferris spoke of this interplay of light and darkness in human life. He said “There are times when the visibility is high. . . There are times when you can see clearly everything that lies ahead of you. There are times when your way

is plain. You know exactly what you want to be and where you want to live. You know exactly what you think and what you don't think, what you believe and don't believe. Those times of visibility are wonderful. Then the fog comes. It may come down upon you largely from the world around you as it is coming down upon many people today, the fog of prejudice and hate, of despair and disenchantment, of violence and doubt. This fog is so thick that it is often difficult to see anything clearly. Or, it may rise up from you, yourself. It may come out of your own condition or mood. You can brew your own fog out of the breath of something that has gone wrong in your own life. Whatever it is, it rises up and blinds you to everything around you. Then you need some fixed point to steer by."

Sometimes we need a fixed point to steer by. Sometimes in the midst of the shadows and fog of human existence we need a pole star. Sometimes in the midst of the rising chaos and the crashing turmoil of our world, we need the beacon of a lighthouse.

This Christmas we celebrate the birth of the one who is our fixed point to steer by. In a world that is still plagued by conflict, there is one who came to give us peace, the heaven-born Prince of Peace. In a world that is marked by death and the fear of death, there is one who came to give us life and to give it abundantly. In a world where incivility and hatred seem to be the rule, there is one who taught us to love God and to love our neighbor. In a world still living in shadows and fog, there is one who is perfect light. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!*