

December 11, 2016

“The Traditions of Christmas: Light”

John 1:4-5

FCF: Our struggle with the “darkness” of this age

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus is the Light of the world.

(magnet) Turning to Him is the only way to face the darkness.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Dark Island is described in C. S. Lewis’ The Voyage of the Dawn Treader as a place where all dreams come true – including nightmares. It is a blackness like the inside of a tunnel, the edge of night. The waters greasy, lifeless. Speed and direction impossible to gauge. Cold pierces the skin. Madness seizes the mind. And you cannot find your way out on your own.

Jesus was born in the dark of night. Those were times of disease, emptiness, broken relationships, poverty, injustice, racism. Times of competing worldviews, philosophies, faiths.

It was dark then. In many respects, it is dark now. Which means that the announcement of One who has come as “the Light of the World” is just as relevant today as it was then. The news is just as good as it was then. Why? Because Jesus really is the Light of the World.

SCRIPTURE READING: [John 1:1-5](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

One of my childhood holiday memories is that of the luminaries every Christmas Eve in our neighborhood. On every street, you could see paper bags filled with sand and a little candle inside. As you drove on straight stretches, it was like you were a plane coming in for a landing. Drivers would turn off their headlights and navigate by these little candles as they lit the way, dispelling the darkness. It’s something like that here in John 1 – images of darkness and light.

This is the third in our series on the deep rootedness of the traditions of Christmas. First, contemplation. Second, music and song. And, now, light. Candles in windows. Lights on trees. It’s little surprise that Christmas has been a celebration filled with light. And well it should be.

John’s Prologue is much like the foyer of a great house. It gives him the opportunity to introduce the themes of the book, pulling us in all the while. Jesus is the Word, the Logos. For the Jew, this meant He is before all things. For the Gentile, this meant He is behind all things. Think of this. Jesus was the agent of God in creation. He is without beginning and without end. Christmas marks the time when He took on flesh, entered history, and came into this world.

He has forever been the Logos. And the Light. This is what John is telling us – that into the midst of the deepest darkness came the greatest Light. Jesus is the Light of the world. And turning to Him, the Light of the world, is the only way to face the darkness of this world.

John tells us Jesus, as the Light of the world, is these three things. First, as the Light, He is life. Second, He is the Light shining. And, third, He is the Light shining against the darkness.

I. THE LIGHT AS LIFE

So, first, John helps us to see that Jesus, this Light, is the Life ([READ John 1:4](#)).

A) *Explanation of “Life”*

1. Not just physical life

Now what does John mean here? Well, if all we had to go on was the first three verses, we might think this is just speaking again to Jesus’ role in creation. And His role was astonishingly real.

2. But eternal life

But this mention of the Light as Life is not just about physical life but eternal life. It’s not so much quantity but quality of life. That is to say, it’s not just life everlasting but ever-deepening.

B) *Jesus as “the Life”*

1. Not just a possessor of life

In that sense, Jesus is “the Life.” And, while He’s very alive, He’s not just a possessor of life.

2. But the bestower of life

He is the source, the bestower, the giver of life (READ John 5:25-26). Look also at His words to Mary by Lazarus’ tomb (READ John 11:25-26). Or His words to Thomas (READ John 14:6).

What we’re seeing here, as the Puritans used to say, is the life of God in the soul of man.

Illustration:

A great image is Jesus’ description of the relationship between the Vine and the branches (READ John 15:5). Or just think in terms of fresh-cut Christmas trees. They look good. And they smell great. But why do the needles keep dropping? Because you killed it. It’s been cut from its source of life. And so, for all practical purposes, it’s dead and will just get worse.

Application:

Jesus as the Light is the Life who brings life. Despite what you may have heard, turning to Jesus does not rob life of life. It brings it. So many stories could be told of people through the years who, after turning to and trusting in Jesus, are awakened to the wonder and beauty of this life! Now contrast that with the life of Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory. He turned his back on God and, according to his biographers, in doing so lost his taste for life. As he grew older, he said he got less and less out of poetry, music, or art. Wonder and joy were lost.

Turning to Jesus does not rob life of life. It brings it. Now I know some of you are saying, “Yeah, but what about those Christians who have no love of life? Look what their faith did for them.” I understand your concern. But the problem is not that they’ve taken their faith too far. The problem is that they haven’t taken it far enough. Jesus is the Light who is the Life.

He is the Light of the world. And turning to Him is the only way to face the darkness.

II. THE LIGHT SHINING

He is the Logos who ever was and the Light ever shining (READ John 1:4-5a). Some of you may know Jesus went so far as to declare this of Himself (READ John 8:12). Quite a claim.

A) *Explanation of “Light”*

What is behind the imagery? How should we understand it? Well, what does light do?

1. Reveals

For starters, it reveals. We walk into a dark room and turn on the light in order to see.

2. Guides

Light guides. Think of a lighthouse. Or using a flashlight to look for a lost pet at night.

3. Warms

Light warms. When we come in from the cold, we head not for the fridge but the fireplace.

B) Jesus as “the Light”

Light reveals, guides, and warms. All of that would have been readily understandable to John’s readers. How then do those physical properties carry over into spiritual realities?

1. Reveals

Jesus, as the Light, reveals God. Man was living in spiritual darkness, ignorant about God.

2. Guides

Jesus, as the Light, guides. Like the glory cloud that guided Israel. Or as a shepherd his sheep.

3. Warms

Jesus, as the Light, warms. He draws us from our dark ways and changes, warms, our lives.

Jesus, the Life, the Light of men, has come as One shining in the darkness.

Illustration:

I mentioned the conversion of Charles Wesley a few weeks ago. His older brother, John, had quite a story as well. They had come to a point in their lives and ministries in which they came to realize that, for all their great labors for God, they did not actually really know God.

For John, that all changed on May 24, 1738. And that was part of a much greater change that was to sweep across much of England. He wrote these words in his journal ([READ quote](#)):

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

This was part of what set in motion the Methodist movement. Which was part of what led to renewal within the Church of England. Which was part of the Great Awakening, a great spiritual revival that had a transformative effect upon a whole culture. William Wilberforce and his sworn efforts against the African slave trade and for “the reformation of manners” was all part of this.

Application:

What was happening? Jesus is the Life, the Light of men, shining in the darkness. This is why we hang the Christmas decorations as we do – to give off warmth and light, to capture just something of what He has done, is doing, and will continue doing in and through His people.

This is why we hang them. And this is how we should see them. Let me encourage you. As you’re moving about in this season and you see those lights, may we be reminded of the One who is indeed the Life, the Light of the world, the only way for us to really face the darkness.

III. THE LIGHT AGAINST DARKNESS

That said, John does then speak to this darkness directly ([READ John 1:4-5](#)).

A) Explanation of “Darkness”

Again, it's worth considering terms. What are we referring to in speaking of darkness?

1. Universal image

Well, like light, it's something of a universal image – especially in a historical context that was a pre-electrical age when the darkness of night was just that. Darkness keeps some bad company.

2. Particular usage

It's the absence of light, a universal image. And it has particular usage and meaning in the Bible. Darkness stands for ignorance, folly, falsehood, a loss or lack of truth. But beyond imagery, the Bible also speaks of darkness as a spiritual force, reflecting the reality of a cosmic battle.

B) The Struggle between Light and Darkness

And there is a struggle implied in John's words – one trying to “overcome” the other.

1. Long history

It is a struggle with a long history. Light is the knowledge of God, leads to good paths, bringing life. Darkness is ignorance, slavery, blindness, all of which brings death. The contrasts couldn't be more stark. And the struggle can be seen all through history, playing itself out every day.

2. Sure outcome

That said, the outcome is sure. Darkness has not “overcome” the Light. It can't extinguish it, put it out or snuff it out like a candle. However much it has tried, is trying, and will keep trying.

John is preparing the reader – in the context of a larger war, for an outbreak of hostility on a whole new front as the Light, as Jesus, takes on flesh and comes into this world. But why?

Illustration:

I mentioned lights we hang at Christmas. There are, of course, some lights we don't want to see. Police lights, for instance, in our rearview mirrors. It's something like that with the Light here in John 1. Jesus unnerves us. Yes, He reveals, guides, and warms. But He also exposes.

Application:

In love, He has and will expose us. “In love? It hardly feels like love.” Well, not many life-saving labors do. But Jesus cares more about our spiritual condition than our emotional moods. So He then allows for us to be tempted and tested, pushed and stretched. He allows for us to flounder, fail, and fall flat on our faces. Why? To expose what's lurking there - the foolish pride, the spiritual cancer, the self-dependence and self-righteousness. To drive us back to where we need to be, on our knees before Him. There's darkness all around us. And within us.

So when that exposure comes, which way will you turn? Away from Him or to Him?

Jesus is the Light of the world. And turning to Him is the only way to face the darkness.

CONCLUSION:

When it comes to lights at Christmas, the story is told of how Martin Luther transformed the look of the Christmas tree after a late-night December walk through the German woods almost 500 years ago. Enthralled with the way the starlight looked as it filtered through branches of evergreen trees, it's said that he felt as if the hand of God had touched his soul and allowed

him to see the world in a much different way. Stopping on a snow-covered rise, he studied the scene for some time. Its tranquil beauty and soft light brought a great sense of peace to him.

Determined to duplicate the atmosphere of that scene inside his own home, Luther attached candleholders to a tree's limbs and wowed his family and friends with the first now brightly lit Christmas tree. From this humble beginning, the custom of putting candles on Christmas trees then quickly swept across Germany. And then, years later, came electric lights.

There's some debate as to how accurate that story is. As a symbol for the season, the Christmas tree does predate Luther by a few decades. And the custom of bringing evergreens into your home during the dark days of Christmas goes back even centuries before that. In any case, using lights to mark the celebration of Christmas goes way back. Which is worth noting.

But, impressive as that may sound, it actually goes back quite a bit further than that - to the coming of Christ Himself. So let's hang the decorations, light the candles, and stoke the fires. For the Christian, Christmas is so much more than an excuse for a party and some time off. It's the celebration of the coming of Jesus into a world and lives darkened with sin and sadness.

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