

## Light in the Darkness

I John 1:1-10

So, why do we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25? After all, neither Matthew nor Luke mentions the day on which the events in their accounts took place. Now, Luke does say that the shepherds were watching their sheep in the fields, but that probably points to a time in the fall, when animals would be allowed to graze on the stubble and stalks that remained after the last grain was harvested. And Matthew mentions a star that signaled Jesus' birth, but since he doesn't tell us the star's position in the night sky, we can't use astronomical charts to pinpoint a date.

And so we shouldn't be surprised that, even from the most ancient times, the Church has had lots of disagreement about when Jesus was born. It seems that the Feast of Epiphany, which takes place on January 6, was actually celebrated before Christmas was, but from ancient times different groups of Christians have attached different meanings to that festival. Some say it points to the time when the wise men showed up in Bethlehem, while others insist it commemorates the time that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. Still others claim that it was the day Jesus was born. The bottom line is that no one really knows.

But we cannot deny that this season of the year is indeed a very appropriate time to celebrate the birth of Christ. And that's because of what John tells us in the first chapter of both his gospel and his first epistle: that Jesus came to bring light into the darkness.

For at least in the northern hemisphere, darkness is all around us at this time of the year. Here in Mississippi, the sun rises at 7am and goes down at 5pm, giving us about ten total hours of daylight. So there's precious little time for any outdoor activities either before or after work or school. Yes, the darkness dominates our life in December.

But John reminds us that the same thing is true all year long, at least in a spiritual sense. For the sad truth is that all too many people prefer to walk in the darkness of sin, hiding from the light of God's presence. Even during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, John 1:11 tells us that many of His own people did not receive Him as their Messiah, but instead rejected Him and crucified Him.

And the same thing continues to be true today. After all, many modern people insist that there is no such thing as absolute truth. They deny the existence of any rules that always apply to everyone everywhere. They insist instead that they are quite capable of making their own decisions about what is right and what is wrong, based on their own reason or experience. Others allow their feelings to guide them, or they simply continue to do what they've always done.

And just as we cannot deny the absence of daylight at this time of year, it is increasingly difficult to deny the darkness that such denial of God's law, such rebellion against God's righteous rule has brought into our world: the gangs of fatherless young men, stealing whatever they want; the otherwise healthy people who look to alcohol or street drugs to solve their problems, and who become homeless addicts as a result; the growing number of young people who seek safety and control in the electronic world of social media and interactive videogames, only to find themselves cut off from both the pleasures and perils of real life.

Yes, many modern people deny the existence of absolute truth, and thus the existence of sin. But such examples prove John to be right when he insists that those who live according to their own reason or experience, their own emotions or traditions are continuing to walk in the darkness, blind to

the truth, deceived about their true spiritual condition. And that is because of what we read in I John 1:5: God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. And that means that God and sin simply cannot coexist.

For what happens when you turn on the lights in a room at night? The darkness just disappears: it's gone. It's destroyed. And that's because darkness has no reality in itself. It is simply the absence of light. In the same way, sin is nothing more and nothing less than the absence of, the rejection of God's will. In fact, sin is really just an attempt to create a space in our lives that is independent of God, separated from God, a place where we, and not God, are in control. Sin thus tries to block the light of God's truth, creating a shadow of darkness in which rebels against Him can hide.

But what happens to people who want to go on walking in the darkness, closing their eyes and ears to the light and truth of God, refusing to have fellowship with Him? Well, John 1:4 reminds us that light and life are inextricably connected: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." So, if we turn away from the light of God, if we refuse the truth of God, if we reject the authority of God, we are actually turning away from life. And if we reject life, that means we embrace death.

And sometimes we can see the connection between sin and death so clearly, can't we? The gang members who just want to go on killing and stealing all too often have their lives cut short. The junkies on the street, those whose pursuit of chemical pleasure only ends in slavery to booze or drugs often succumb to street violence or disease or hypothermia. Well, the same sort of death comes to those who embrace any kind of sin, those who turn to anything else instead of God. It doesn't matter what sort of idol you place between yourself and God. It doesn't matter what you use to try to block out the light of His glory and truth. Booze or pills, money or relationships, jobs or careers, fame or family or fortune – anything, good or bad, that we put in the place of God cuts us off from the life that only He can provide, leaving us in the shadow, the darkness of death.

But that's why it's so appropriate that we celebrate Christmas at this, the darkest time of the year. For what does John 1:4 tell us about Jesus? Yes, in Him is life, the life that is the light of men. But John 1:5 also insists that this light shines in the darkness, our darkness. Yes, the eternal Word of God, the One through Whom God spoke everything into being, this is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. And by virtue of His birth, as Jesus took on human flesh, He allowed us to see the glory of God in a way we can understand. Or to put it another way, Jesus shines the light of God into the world in a way that doesn't blind us or terrify us, but that allows us to get a glimpse of God's grace and truth.

And maybe you need to see that today. Maybe you know you need God's grace today. Maybe you've put all sorts of things, even good things, ahead of God on your priority list. Maybe your selfish decisions have made a mess of your health or your finances or your relationships. Maybe you know you haven't been walking in God's light very consistently this year. Maybe you've been trying to hide in the darkness of your sin.

But what does John promise us? That in Christ, the light of God shines in the darkness. And in I John 1:7, he promises us that it is the blood of the Word of God made flesh, the blood of the Son of God, the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. And only two verses later, John assures us that if we confess our sins, if we admit that we've been walking in the darkness, God will forgive us. More than that, he promises us that God will cleanse us from all unrighteousness, shining the light of His grace and truth into our hearts, enabling us to walk ever more consistently in His marvelous light.

But did you notice why John says God will do all of this? In the first place, because He is faithful. Yes, that's the amazing truth: we don't have to wonder whether God will forgive us. That's because God is faithful: faithful to keep all the promises He made through all the prophets through all the years, promises to send a baby called "Immanuel" to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem, promises to send a suffering Servant to die on behalf of all His people. And because God was faithful to keep His promise to send Jesus to us, we can be sure that He will keep all His other promises as well, promises like the one we find in I John 1:9, the promise to forgive us and cleanse us if we will only confess our sins and trust in Christ, if we'll only turn away from the darkness and toward His marvelous light.

But this verse tells us that God is not only faithful: He is also righteous, always acting in accord with His perfect law. So because Jesus was indeed born on that first Christmas, because He truly became a man and lived among us, He was able to stand in our place, paying the penalty that all our sins deserve. So, because God is righteous, He has to accept the perfect sacrifice Christ has offered for all who trust in Him. It is the cross of Christ that is thus our greatest assurance, the greatest reason for our rejoicing, even in this Christmas season.

But John 1:12 insists that God's grace goes even further than that. For after God forgives us, He doesn't just send us on our way, back into the darkness to try to find our way in a sinful world. God doesn't even just enlist us in His army, making us soldiers who do His bidding only out of a sense of duty. No, if we receive Jesus as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord, God gives us the right to become His very own children. Yes, because of His faithfulness and righteousness, because Jesus came to suffer with us and for us, God adopts us into His own family – not because of our will, but because of His will, because He wants so very much to be close to us.

And how do we know all that is true? Because of the message of Christmas: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In Jesus Christ God came to be with us. God came to save sinners like us. God came to shine the light of His love and grace and truth into the darkness of sin, not driving it away but obliterating it.

So yes, this dark time of the year is the perfect opportunity to celebrate Christ's marvelous light. And yes, we can do that in a symbolic way, as we display our illuminated decorations for everyone to see. Here in Port Gibson, many homes and gardens are draped with strings of lights, and the hospital has done an especially elaborate job this year. But I suppose our signature display is at the fairgrounds, where simple strands of lights are virtually invisible during the day, but create a giant tree at night, visible for miles in both directions, reminding all of us that Christmastime is here in an unmistakable way.

So, while we light up the long nights with electricity, isn't it even better to shine the light of Christ into the darkness of sin that we find all around us? Can't we show and share the love of God with those who need it so desperately? And can't we turn away from the shadows that sin casts over our own lives, stepping out instead into the light of God's grace and truth, living for the glory of the One Who died for us?