

First Sunday after Christmas
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.
Amen.*

Good morning and Happy New Year's Eve! Oh, and Merry Christmas as well! It *is* still Christmas after all: at least for another 5 or 6 days. And, we even just heard the Christmas story. Did you catch that? Did you notice the Christmas story within John's Gospel this morning? It's easy to miss, so if you tuned out, even for a moment, you may have missed it.

John doesn't give us the familiar Nativity Story we find within the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We don't read of any shepherds, angels, or even a manger. But the Christmas story sure is in there, and if you tuned out, even for a moment, you may have missed it.

Yes, John's Christmas story sure is *different*. In truth, the whole of Christ's birth doesn't even get a full sentence for itself in John's Gospel. We read, "And the Word became flesh, and lived among us..." It's a short pronouncement, but it's there.

It is indeed a short and strange way to include the Christmas Story, but it's not because John thinks Christ's birth is insignificant or unimportant; personally, I believe it's the very centerpiece of this passage: the reason for the season if you will. But, John also wants to tell you exactly who this Christ is who was born, and how he relates to us.

In his explanation, John uses phrases like "In the beginning..." and identifies Jesus as "the Word" and "the Light" to spark our memories of Genesis and the creation of the world through God's speech in order to tell us that not only was Christ present when God created all of existence, but that Christ was and *is* that very divine and creative God through which everything is made. "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." John tells us that Christ is eternally both distinct from and of one being with God. John tells us that Christ is the mediator between God and creation. Essentially, John uses all this esoteric—and frankly odd—language to paint for us our doctrine of the Trinity. It may even sound similar to the words of the Nicene Creed, which we'll recite together in a few moments. But, in painting this picture of who Christ is, John is telling us something else as well—something about who *we* are—and if you tuned out, even for a moment, you may have missed it.

And who could blame you? We've been missing messages from and even the presence of God throughout human history. I have to admit that I probably miss more of these messages and instances of God's presence than those I don't. John reminds us that even when God—in Jesus—was in this world, "the world did not know him." But, John also tells us that those who *do* know him, "who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of

God...” I’m going to reiterate that for you, just in case you missed it; John is telling us that for those who know Christ, they have the power to become children of God.

I’m going to stop there for a moment. You may be wondering: *Children of God? What in the world does that mean? What is John telling us here? Oh, and how can we be children of God? We say in the creeds that Jesus is the only Son of God. Hello!* If you’re confused, you’re not the only one, and thankfully, the Apostle Paul has some answers to the question of what it means to be “children of God...”

Now, before you get a big head and start claiming that *you too* are a begotten Son or Daughter of God, Paul tells us in his letter to the Christians in Galatia that our relationship to God the Father is a bit different from Christ’s. Paul tells us that Christ came “in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children.” *So, we’re adopted into the family? So what?* Well, Paul covers that too.

Paul tells us through our adoption as children, we become heirs, “through God.” *Heirs? Heirs to what? To the Kingdom of God?* Well, sure! We believe we’ll go to heaven when we die. But we also become heirs to the mission of Christ. To represent Christ as the light of all people. To let our light shine in the darkness, and not allow the darkness to overcome.

And, there’s a lot of darkness for us to overcome. There is so much darkness in this world: places and moments where and when it seems the light of Christ can never shine, where and when it seems like the darkness truly has overcome. There are places where poverty, disease, hunger, and thirst run rampant. There are places where racism, sexism, and all forms of xenophobic oppression bear their ugly heads. There are places where war, violence, and death are ever-present and there are moments when those who find themselves within these places, and even those who do not seem to only be giving increase to the darkness. For some, even in moments when others see a place where the light is shining most brightly, their own struggles can cause them to see nothing but the deepest darkness. There may even be those places and moments that make you feel that soon, darkness is all that there will be. But the Good News of the Gospel promises us that no, this is not the case.

The Gospel promises us, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” And, the Gospel promises us that when *we* do *our* part and let *our* light shine, then the darkness still will not overcome. But, here’s the catch...

It may seem like it would be easy to find the places and moments in our lives that need a little, shining light. When and where there’s poverty, disease, hunger, and thirst, it can seem obvious that we need to give what we can to help fulfill our neighbors’ needs. When and where xenophobia and oppression arise, it may seem obvious that we need to use our voices to name it and condemn it. When and where there is war and violence, it may seem obvious that we need to seek peace. And, when we notice someone can only see darkness, it may seem obvious that we ought to help them find the light. But, just as easy as it was to miss the Christmas story, and to miss John’s message that we too can become children of God, it can be so easy to miss the moments when it is *our* turn to do *our* part and let *our* light shine. It truly can be so easy that if you tune out, even for a moment, you might miss it.

So, as we move into a New Year—as changes are promised and resolutions are made—I know exactly what one of my New Year’s resolutions will be, and I hope you will help keep me honest in keeping it, and maybe even set the same resolution for yourself. This coming year, I resolve to do my best to stay tuned *in* and be aware of the places and moments where and when darkness is present, and where and when I do find darkness, to let my light shine. And may you, (as adopted children and heirs of God) when you are confronted with darkness in the world, may you overcome the darkness with your light.

Amen. Happy New Year.