"The Light Shines in the Darkness"

John 1:1-14

The Christmas Money (1917) - When the Czarist government in Russia collapsed in 1917, a reign of terror began. There was no organized government. Bands of outlaws roamed the country, plundering, raping, and killing wherever they went.

These bands usually came at night. Children were well aware of the danger. They were terribly afraid when these men entered their homes.

It was shortly after Christmas. The children in the Mennonite villages had all memorized a ***Wunsch*** or a special recitation for Christmas. It was the custom at that time that each child recited the Wunsch to parents, grandparents, and other relatives as they visited in the home during the holiday season. Usually children got a ***Kopeke*** or small coin after each recital, so they collected a number of these coins. They called them their Christmas money.

One night the dogs on the yard of the Klassen family started barking. Everybody was up in a flash. They knew the bandits were coming! They huddled together in a little group. The children clung to their parents' hands.

Soon there came the usual pounding on the door, and the rough shouts demanding entrance.

Father Klassen opened the door. The bandits rushed in, grabbed Father Klassen and his oldest son, and placed them against the wall.

"Give us money," they demanded.

"All our money has already been taken by others who have come before you," said Mr. Klassen.

"Then we will shoot you," stated one of the bandits coldly.

One of the children, a little girl about ten years old, walked over to the bandit and said, "I will get my Christmas money".

She ran out of the room, and before the bandit knew what was happening she was back with her money. She put the little coins into the bandit's hand.

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Then the bandit bent down and kissed her.

Silently the bandits left the house. There was no shooting that night, and nothing was taken.

As was the custom in that home after these terrifying experiences, they all knelt down as a family, and Father thanked God for his gracious protection. God has many ways his wonders to perform.

We in this country, and our brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union no longer have to worry about bandits coming in the night to take away our Christmas money. We are blessed to live in peace-filled nations where we can comfortably sit back and celebrate the Christmas season. We don't have to fear what's happening outside in the darkness.

Today the darkness we face has come indoors and into our hearts. The fear we experience is not from without but from within. We no longer fear being persecuted for being a Christian as the first century Christians of the Bible were persecuted. We no longer fear being persecuted for being a Christian as these 20th century Mennonites did in Russia during the revolution.

Those Christians who have historically been persecuted for their faith have had to turn to Jesus for strength and support during their times of suffering and weakness. Just as we tend to

turn to Jesus during our down times, grieving times, times of suffering. But how often in our lives have we really turned to Jesus and become dependent on him to get us through. How often during our times of inner darkness have we let the light Jesus offers shine through?

Today, we fear that inner darkness because too often we try to feel our way through on our own. We try so hard to be self-sufficient and independent. We think we can make it through the darkness on our own. We think we can make it through a financial crisis, a marriage crisis, the death of a family member or close friend, on our own. So we begin feeling our way through, on our own, never wanting to admit that we might need help, that we might need some light and guidance. This morning's gospel reading from John applies to us and to our modern day society more than it has applied to any other society in history. Because our society preaches and we learn very well the lesson of self-sufficiency, independence, self-centeredness, worship of the self. As a result we live in an inner-darkness.

Today, in the midst of that inner-darkness we celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the coming of new life and light into our darkness.

John writes: The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world was made through the light, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

Still today, even on this Christmas day, there will be many Christians who will receive him not. It is no wonder that this holiday season can be so depressing for so many people, because

they try to make it through these days on their own. And as they do, their inner-darkness becomes even darker and more depressing than ever.

For those of us who are willing to open our hearts and to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ with family, friends, and church, we together experience that true light that came into the world on this day.

The light which Jesus brings us today is a revealing light. The person who has something to hide hates the light and loves the dark, but while we might be able to hide things from one another, it is impossible to hide anything from God.

The light which Jesus brings shows things as they really are; it exposes us, stripping away disguises and concealments. We can never really see ourselves as we truly are until we see ourselves through the light and the eyes of Jesus. What do you think Jesus sees as he looks at this church this morning, and as he looks at you an individual member? What do you see through the eyes of Jesus as you look at yourself on this Christmas Day? Jesus often guides us to God by revealing us to ourselves, by shedding some light on that inner-darkness that we all have and experience.

So the light Jesus brings to us this morning is not only a revealing light but a guiding light. We experience many hardships and many joys such as the birth of a son or daughter, during our lifetimes. Sometimes the pace seems slow while at other times we must run to keep us as during the Christmas season. These last weeks have been hectic for many of us.

Through it all we know that we would be lost in our inner-darkness of self without that revealing and guiding light of Jesus Christ.

It is the light that eventually gets us to our destination and goal, the day of Resurrection. Almost 2,000 years ago that light was born not by the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. As we together celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion this morning, may we digest that light into our inner darkness's. And in the New Year may we learn to give of ourselves to eliminate that darkness as that little girl did when the robbers came into her family's home and were overwhelmed and defeated by her humility and giving and peace.

May the peace of God . . .

#301 – Bright and Glorious in the Sky