

“Life and Light”

John 1:1-9, 10-18

“What has come into being in him was life” (John 1:3).

For those of us who put out Christmas decorations this year in spite of zero or few visitors because of Rona, its now time to pack them up, if we haven't already. The artificial tree will be dismantled branch by branch or the real one dragged out for recycling, trailing dry brown needles in its wake.

The wreaths will be lovingly laid in boxes. The ornaments will be placed in containers where they will endure a drab existence in the attic for the next 11 months. Here at Divinity, the Saturday morning men's prayer group put up the 3 trees next to the altar and will take them down again as we do every year. This year we decided not to put up the wreaths and garlands along the sides of the sanctuary because of Rona and because of the death of Erik Schumacher who had taken over the decorating of the church from Elaine Fix. We need a new Christmas decorator for next year.

Epiphany will begin just a few days from now and the “12 days of Christmas” will be over. We in the church will return reluctantly to what the Christian calendar bluntly calls – “ordinary time”.

This weekend we take a look at the Christmas story we rarely examine. Matthew's account of the magi, and Luke's of the angels and shepherds, we know well. This is the third Christmas story, the one told by John.

You'd have a hard time writing a children's Christmas pageant based on John's gospel. John tells of no expectant parents journeying to Bethlehem. There are neither shepherds nor angels. Nor are there wise men clambering over hill and dale, following a star. There's not even a baby lying in a manger: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ..."

A Christmas pageant based on the gospel of John could be a real boon to budget-conscious churches. You'd have no need for shepherd and holy family outfits. No manger of 2-by-4s, stuffed with straw. You wouldn't even need actors or a baby Jesus.

All you would need is a single candle. The church would be bare and dark, the chancel stripped of all furniture and decorations. The only thing visible would be a small, insignificant table. On that humble table would sit a single, unlit candle.

The worshipers would file in and sit for a very long time, silent as a Quaker meeting. They would sit long enough to begin to feel uneasy at the silence — and maybe even a little scared of the dark, as childhood fears bubble up out of distant memory.

At long last, someone would march solemnly down the aisle and, without a word, light that single candle.

The darkness would be pierced, shoved back by the one thing that has power, ultimately, to push all darkness back: *the light*.

And that would be that.

No one would, of course, ever seriously try to put on a Christmas pageant based on John's gospel. Yet, having conducted this little thought experiment, can you see how different John's Christmas story is? No color, music or pageantry: just one blazing, incontrovertible truth, a single statement so profound that maybe the only way to appreciate it is to sit in utter darkness and watch the candle-lit shadows play across the ceiling: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

How the light of a candle can push back the darkness is a remarkable sight, one we seldom witness in these days of electricity. Even the smallest, solitary flame can accomplish that, but no amount of darkness can make that candlelight retreat 1 inch!

"In the beginning was the Word," says John. Small comfort in that! Words are cheap and plentiful in this wired culture of ours. Google it!

But that's not the way the Bible looks at words. Words, in the Scriptures, are almost living things. In Genesis 1, God speaks a word and creation comes into being. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of [God's] mouth" (Psalm 33:6). God's word is remarkably enduring: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

We know from experience that this is true of certain words we speak or hear in our own lives. Yes, to be sure, there are the swiftly forgotten words, the social pleasantries that help pass the time in a doctor's waiting room. But then, should we pass from there into the examining-room and hear the fateful words fall from our doctor's lips, "I'm sorry to inform you the cancer

test was positive,” those words take on a different character. They endure as though blasted into a concrete milestone, marking for all time — for all *our* time, anyway — the dividing-line between life as it once was and life as it will never be again.

Commenting on this Prologue to John, N.T. Wright points out how “the idea of the Word would also make some of his readers think of ideas that pagan philosophers had discussed. Some spoke of the ‘word’ as a kind of principle of rationality, lying deep within the whole cosmos and within all human beings. Get in touch with this principle, they said, and your life will find its true meaning. Well, maybe, John is saying this to them; but the Word isn’t an abstract principle, it’s a person. And I’m going to introduce you to him ... that’s the theme of this gospel: if you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus.”

Look long and hard at Jesus. “What has come into being” in Jesus Christ, says John, “was life.”

Not the sort of life the world values at Christmastime. The life the world values is the shallow exuberance of holiday cheer, the “life of the party.”

It is, by and large, a party to which the poor are not invited. For who can afford parties when you’re worried about finding enough food to eat, or a roof over your head?

It is not the sort of party to which the sick and disabled are invited, either — unable as they are to venture out and see the sparkling lights on the houses, or to rub elbows with shoppers in the malls.

It is not a party to which those who are grieving feel especially welcome, either. Too many who have recently lost loved ones to death find themselves regarding Christmas with wistful sadness, as Tiny Tim in the old movie version of *A Christmas Carol* gazes through the toy-store window at treasures he may never hold.

Maybe — just maybe — this year of coronavirus is teaching everyone what it’s like to dial down the holiday merriment, to value the single glowing candle in place of the bustling crowds.

The “life” of the secular Christmas party (in most years, anyway) is revelry and merriment — too much to eat and drink — and at the end of it all, a veritable mountain of trash to haul out to the curb. “Good times,” most would affirm — yet hardly the sort of experience one would sum up using the single, glowing word: “life.”

Years ago, entertainment mogul Ted Turner described this sort of empty existence most vividly, when he cynically remarked: “Life is like a B-movie. You don’t want to leave in the middle of it, but you don’t want to see it again.”

The secular world seems, in its B-movie revelry, to be desperately grasping at anything that resembles life — but somehow never catching it. How else can you explain the “holiday blues” phenomenon that afflicts so many, as one-year morphs into another? Having failed to discover life inside the gaudiest package under the tree, or suspended inside the last drop hanging from the lip of the wine-bottle, the secular world hunkers down for many more weeks of winter, hardly daring, at this early stage, to dream of spring.

Here's where John's vision of life in the dead of winter, of a glowing candle piercing the darkness, is so powerful. You don't need to have had a perfect Christmas. You don't need to have received the gift you always wanted. You don't even need to have celebrated Christmas at all.

All you need is to have encountered the One at the heart of the celebration and to have known, as you did so, that — as the carol says — “light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings.”

Many congregations will invite worshipers — whether in-person or virtually — to come to the table where Christ is host. There, they will partake of the tiniest portion of bread and wine, whose taste — far from rich holiday fare — is perfectly ordinary. It's hardly a meal to rival so many Christmas feasts.

But that's not the point, is it? Our purpose as Christ-followers is not to bask in the “life of the party.” It is to celebrate, in Christ, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, the party of life!

May the peace of God . . .

#270 – Hark! The Herald Angels Sing