

“Light of the World”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020

Introduction:

With Thanksgiving behind us, the Christmas season is now fully upon us. Of course, in the church, we know that’s technically not true. Today *actually* marks the beginning of the season of Advent, which is the time of preparation and waiting that comes *before* Christmas. It’s a time when we remember the Israelite’s long wait for the coming Messiah and our own long wait for his promised return.

The season of Christmas actually doesn’t begin until Christmas day, and then runs until January 5th, the day before Epiphany. That’s where we get the Twelve Days of Christmas we’re always singing about.

Some people take that distinction very seriously, especially in the church. I worked with a pastor a long time ago who steadfastly refused to sing Christmas carols in church until Christmas day because, as he would remind me every year during Advent, “It’s not Christmas yet.”

But as we’ve seen, where Christmas is concerned, the world doesn’t care about the calendar. Local radio station 93.3 “The Bus” switched their format over to 24-hour Christmas music all the way back on November 4th. I got in my car one day, turned on the radio, and thought “Halloween was just last week. Why are they playing ‘Jingle Bells’ on the radio now?”

So, the world’s headlong sprint toward Christmas has begun but I, for one, think that is okay. If the celebration of Christ’s birth softens people and brings them together; if it gives us all some sense of joy and peace on earth, then that’s a good thing. Especially in this year when there’s been so much disruption and division and turmoil; when we’ve had to adjust to an entirely different way of doing things, and when so many of pieces of our lives have been put on hold.

So, these next four Sundays, we will celebrate Advent, yes, we will light the Advent Candles and remember the meaning of this Advent Season. But we are also going to go ahead and embrace the meaning of Christmas and the fullness of the joy it brings!

We’ve done this in recent years too. A few years ago, we pointed out the connections between our faith and the great television specials of Christmas. One year we unpacked the theology of our favorite Christmas carols. This year, Mary and I will be celebrating some of the great traditions of Christmas and we’ll explore how those traditions reflect the things we believe about Christmas, the birth of Christ, and the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, into the world.

This week: Let there be twinkle lights!

First Scripture Reading: John 1:1-5

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Second Scripture Reading: John 8:12

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”



Sermon: “Light of the World”

When I am asked to perform a wedding, I always require premarital counseling. I want to make sure the couple has at least begun talking about some of the important issues that will affect their life together: things like money and finances, careers, how you want to raise your children, politics, and of course, Christmas lights. You might think I’m joking, but I do. I ask them to talk about holiday traditions, like where you spend Christmas, what you eat on Thanksgiving, and what color lights you put on your tree. And the reason I ask couples to talk through those things is because of my good friends Chet and Shelly.

When they got married 22 years ago, everything was hunky-dory until it came time to put up a Christmas tree. Now, in Chet’s family, they had always decorated their tree with white lights. It was all he had ever known. But Shelly’s family had always used multi-colored lights on their tree. So, when it came time for them to decorate their first tree together, they found themselves at an impasse; a moment of crisis. This wasn’t just a simple disagreement. This was a serious ideological difference that they simply could not reconcile. Both of them loved their family traditions and neither wanted to change. So, they bought a second tree. Two trees. Two sets of lights. Problem solved.

Christmas lights can be serious business, but they are also one of my favorite things about Christmas. Every year Mary and I take the boys on a drive around town looking at Christmas lights. We get milkshakes and make an event of it. And in our years of doing that we've seen all kinds of displays. Some are simple and elegant. Single candles in every window. White lights on the hedges and in the trees. Icicle lights hanging from the eaves.

Some are a little more elaborate. Brilliant, dazzling colored lights. Brightly lit displays of Santas and snowmen. Elaborate and carefully choreographed light shows that are set to music. You just pull up in your car and tune your radio to the right frequency and you can enjoy the show as their lights dance to the beat of the music.

And then there's the good people of Guilford Road in Upper Arlington who have topped them all. This one family has been collecting light up display pieces for years and they put them all out in their yard every Christmas. All of them. There's got to be well over a hundred. It's truly spectacular. And we make a point of going by every year on our milkshake and Christmas light drives.

Lights are always an important part of the Christmas decorations at our house, too. They are one of the first things we put up and the last thing we take down. And I always want to leave mine up long after Christmas because I love how they light up the night.

We use light at Christmas for decoration. But think about how important light is in our lives all year. Light is necessary for life. Plants don't grow without light and we don't live without plants. And for the entirety of human history, light has been invaluable as a hedge against the darkness and the dangers that lurk therein, and as a tool of navigation to help travelers find their way. And light shows us the truth. When your jacket thrown carelessly across a chair looks like a boogeyman at night, turning on a light shows you what's really there. Things can look different, confusing, even threatening in the dark. Light shows us the truth.

Which is why the gospel writer John calls Jesus "The Light of the World." In him is life. In him we find the way to God. In him, all darkness is cast aside, and the truth is made plain. That image John uses, of light in the darkness, has its roots in the oldest parts of the Judeo-Christian story. At creation, in the very beginning, when the world is formless, and void and darkness covers the face of the deep, the first thing God creates, is light and then God separates that light from the darkness. We hear echoes of that in John 1 as the author tells us that from the beginning, Jesus, the Word of God, has always been present. And he is light that shines in the darkness which the darkness has not been able to overcome. And again, John uses this imagery in Chapter 8 when we find that Jesus is a life-giving, guiding light that shows us the way.

It is important to say here that there is much beauty and light in God's creation. We see and experience it every day. But we also live within the darkness of human sin, both others' and our own. And the good news is that while darkness often seems to prevail, that darkness still has not overcome the light of Christ. And that is the truth that gives us strength to endure a life threatening and norm-challenging pandemic. It is the truth that gives us hope to work and patiently wait for change in a world filled with injustice. It is the truth that gives us courage to live our lives according to God's will, even when so many people encourage us to seek our own will.

Even though God made the world good, the human race has turned away from God so often that there is plenty of darkness to go around. There would be no shortage of examples if we chose to list them. And yet in this season of Advent, we remember that God came as light to a people lost in shadow. In Jesus, God broke into human history in the life of a child, small, inconsequential, born to a pair of nobodies (frankly), in a forgotten backwater town of the Roman Empire. In Christ, God shed all divinity and accepted the limitations and humility of life as one of us, to understand us, to share our weakness, to live and ultimately die a sinner's death, not for God's own well-being or benefit, but for ours.

And in so doing, God shines a light in the world that the world can't put out. It is the light of life and of truth that shows us the way. It is a light of self-sacrifice. It is a light of selflessness. It is a light of compassion and empathy. It is a light of love. It is the light of Christ.

And that light shines in the darkness, and political gamesmanship has not overcome it. And division has not overcome it. And pandemic fears have not overcome it. And injustice, and racism and hatred have not overcome it. And wars and hunger and inequality have not overcome it.

So as you drive around this Christmas season, and you see the trees lit up and you see the shining displays in people's yards, the candles in windows, the icicle lights hanging from eaves; let those lights be reminders of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, and be encouraged. For in every light that shines in the darkness, we see the light of Christ that overcomes the brokenness of this world. And we are given hope.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.