

Reflection: Christmas 2007: *John 1:1-18*

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I've heard it said that this first chapter of John's Gospel has inspired more theological writing than any other chapter of the Bible. I'm not surprised. John's Gospel begins with powerful words that make us think about who God is and what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ. They are words that echo Genesis' creation story, "In the beginning."

These are words that speak of all dimensions of time—and the life of the world --and the light of all people. Good words. Strong words. Poetic words. Words that are beautiful, but also words that are difficult to pin down. These are the kind of words that call people to write treatises that wrestle with their meaning. These are words that beckon us to theological contemplation.

I was reminded of those words when I opened a rather unique Christmas card this week. The background was black in fact, most of the card was black except in the center where there was a small star-- brilliantly shining. A light shining, but shining in the darkness.

I was also reminded of those words as I thought back on Christmas' past. When I was a kid it was not uncommon that during the Christmas season my parents would bundle my brothers and sister and me into car at night and we would drive around to see the lights on the houses. There were scenes of Santa Clauses and elves and reindeer and of course, the "Look at that one! Look at that one!"

Well, once after doing that, we came back to our house and got out of the car and looked around our street. The house of our next door neighbors was completely dark--They had already gone to bed. Our house was dark, too, but the tree lights were on and they were gently shining in the darkness. Remembering that and the card I received earlier this week, it dawned on me: Christmas isn't about light. It's about light in the darkness. As St. John says, "The light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it." There is a kind of defiance to the light. It lives in the darkness but the darkness cannot overcome it.

It is not a simple piece of Scripture. I struggle with these words because they don't say what I want them to say. I want them to declare that when the light comes into the world it overcomes, it obliterates the darkness. It takes away the bleak mid-winter with every sadness, every despair, every raw deal, every horrendous tragedy, every evil plan, every god-awful, life-sucking disease, and tosses the whole mess into the cosmic trash bin. I want the light to arrive and to win, and I want it to win big. I mean I want the light to deal with the darkness in a way that is so overwhelming, so completely devastating, that I never have to think about it again.

Instead of total victory, we get something much more "modest" in John's Gospel. The light came into the world, and the darkness did not extinguish it. But neither did the light wipe out the darkness. Now, while I may not like the perspective on the light given by this text, I do have to admit that it strikes me as being true.

In the 2,000 plus years that have unfolded since that night in Bethlehem, can anyone claim that the darkness has diminished? Is there any less pain, any less meanness in the human spirit, any less heartache?

"The light shines in the darkness," writes John. And maybe that's the thing. Maybe that's the gospel writer's point. It is not that the light obliterates the darkness; it is simply that the light is there.

This, I think, is the message of the incarnation—the story behind the story that we will tell each other this day. God enters into the darkness to sit alongside of us a Providential presence—God with us—Emmanuel. God refuses to dwell in the heavens above and from a safe distance watch the drama of human life play out. Instead, our Provident God climbs right into the darkest places to be with us; and in that holy and luminous action, we find reason enough to hope.

When Robert Louis Stevenson was a little boy he lived in a house on a hillside in Scotland. Every evening he would watch the lamplighter walk through the streets in the valley below lighting each of the village street lights. "Look, Mother," he would say. "Here comes the man who punches holes in the darkness."

As women and men of Providence, we are called to be light in the darkness, to be a Providential presence. We are called to punch holes in the darkness. We punch holes in the darkness when we find ways to bring the light of ourselves to the dark places of our world.

Punching holes in the darkness is what the candles that burn in our windows symbolize they are--candles of hope to overcome despair
 candles of peace to dispel discord and violence
 candles of joy to dissipate sadness
 candles of courage to ease all fear
 candles of love to uproot hatred.

A number of years ago, I was invited by a friend to make a retreat in a small, out of the way, "holler" in rural West Virginia. At night, we would sit on the outside porch watching the sky darkening and the shadows coming on. It was fascinating. The house was high in the hills above a small town. First there would be one light. Then the minutes would pass and another light, then another. A trail of light wound its way below us, around and in and out. I watched wondering what it was and how it was created. My friend, smiled and said, "Ah, you've noticed. We are still poor and a bit backward here. That is the lamplighter, walking through town, lighting the gas lamps."

As I recall those lamps being lit, I am grateful for so many Providence people like yourselves who day after day—not just on Christmas--punch holes in the darkness. We know them – you --by the trail of light left behind. Truly, you are the light shining in the darkness.

(With extensive borrowing of both words and ideas from Megan McKenna, John Shea, and a sermon entitled "*Luminaria*" by Dr. Scott Black Johnston).

A Caveat

Over the years, people have asked for copies of my various talks and homiletic “reflections.” I’ve hesitated to put them into print for several reasons. Chief among those reasons is rooted in my background as an English major and the accusation of plagiarism.

Unlike papers that I’ve written for peer and scholarly review, where I’ve been very careful to note my sources, the talks that I’ve prepared infrequently reference their sources—which are many. I’ve found that my process is preparing a talk is akin to the process I use in cooking, where I consult many recipes in books and online and borrowing a hint from one, an ingredient from another, I concoct what feels satisfying to me and those who will join with me at the table.

The process that I typically follow when preparing any kind of oral presentation, especially for worship, involves reading the scripture, reflecting upon it, consulting various commentaries, jotting notes, reading other sermons or homilies in print and online, highlighting relevant passages, reading the blogs of other women theologians and preachers, then letting it all percolate for a time. In between times, I return to old journal entries, story collections and only then do I sit down to compose—drawing upon a combination of many others’ words, thoughts, ideas, stories, and illustrations and weaving them together for my intended audience. Since most of what I present is intended for the Divine Providence community, I’m always concerned about viewing my topic through the lens of Providence spirituality. That is what I consider my original contribution to these writings.

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