

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...through him all things were made. And in him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The poetry of these words is some of the most beautiful in the Bible.

John’s Gospel, unlike any of the others, begins in eternity and before the beginning of time. He brings us back to the origins of the world and all life in the Word of God. We are in that creation. We are people of eternity, born in the beginning, in God’s plan, and made for life. When God created the world, he did not create light, he commanded the light into being and through his word. When God said the words, “Let there be light”, light was created. These words were God’s first act. Before that light all was darkness and chaos, “*tohu waybohu*” are the Hebrew words for this dark chaos, this formless void. By referencing this time of darkness from before creation, John is describing the world into which Jesus was born; not much different from the world we wake up to every morning if we are to read or listen to the world news. Even Bethlehem was dark for Christmas which was a significant metaphor for the plight of our world today. For even two thousand years after the birth of Jesus the light is battling with the darkness. And even though God has given the world covenants, laws, judges, kings, and prophets the darkness and the light remain in an endless struggle to dominate our existence.

And so, in the midst of this struggle between darkness and light, we pick up the story given to us by John. John tells us that God is unwilling to cede the world to darkness,

and so God sends himself to take on flesh as a new hope for the world. Jesus Christ becomes an incredible gift to us – God incarnate to show us the way to lightness and to the hope God has for us. Of course, other players in the Bible saw glimpses of God’s glory and light, but when the Word becomes flesh, God shows his followers how light, glory, grace and truth sound and behave. God has provided us with the perfect example of what God wants of the world. John does not start his gospel telling us the story of Jesus’ incarnation; Instead, John tells us of the *significance* of Jesus’ incarnation. John cuts right to the importance of this event instead of letting us linger in the kinder, gentler version of the story.

What is challenging about John’s version of the story is that John immediately invites us into a choice when we hear the significance of Jesus becoming incarnate. We can accept the truth that Jesus offers us or not. This was not true just for those listening to John’s original message. It is true for us today. We too can be people who do not accept Jesus, and who do not live in the light. We can turn our eyes from those in prison, from those barely keeping out of poverty, and from those victims of discrimination and intimidation. We can allow the darkness to spread, not claiming the light of Jesus in our lives, and not shining the light of Christ into the darkness.

Verse 14 of today’s Gospel begins with, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” I was fascinated to discover that the Hebrew translation of this would mean that God pitched his tent and moved in with us. This is a new and wonderful way of envisioning the incarnation. God just pitched his tent and started living next door!

I have just returned from a fabulous vacation where I was privileged to see Greece and a part of Turkey. And while it was a dream trip, there is something about being a tourist that misses the real essence of what I want to experience and encounter in these new places. Yes, I was able to bring home great pictures and memories of what I had seen, but what about the world within those pictures and memories? When I travel, I want to know what makes the culture I am observing tick; what makes this place different from my home, and what makes it the same. I want to pitch my tent in the backyard of this new culture and find out who inhabits my neighborhood. What makes us think alike, and what makes us think differently. That is what God did in John's gospel today. God wanted to experience our world so that God could better relate to the human condition. So, God became Jesus; pitching his tent among us amid our broken and pitiful world so that he could more intimately know us as we could more intimately know him. And as the teachings of Jesus became known, those around him began to understand the full meaning of what God wants us to know about God's hopes and dreams for us. Through Jesus they were then, and we are now, led to the hopeful and faith-creating truth that God's light is more powerful than darkness, that God's love is more powerful than hate and that God's life-embodied in the Christ child is more powerful even than death.

The thrust of John's Gospel is expressed beautifully in Jim Strathdee's hymn, I Am the Light of the World, which is meant to be sung after the Christmas celebration is over; when we have forgotten the pomp and glitter of the Christmas tree, and the decorations around our homes are put away. It reminds us of what John's Gospel is really about; that Christ came into the world to change the world, but we are the ones who must carry

on the work. We are the agents of change. As the light bearers, we must take the love and hope that we find in the incarnation of Jesus and find our place to make a difference.

I am the light of the world, you people come and follow me.
If you follow and love, you'll know the mystery, of what you were meant to do and be.

1. When the song of the angels is stilled.
When the star in the sky is gone.
When the kings and the shepherds have found their way home.
The work of Christmas is begun!

And what is that work?

2. To find the lost and lonely one,
To heal that broken soul with love,
To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
To feel the earth below the sky above!

3. To free the prisoner from his chains,
To make the powerful care,
To rebuild the nations with strength and goodwill,
To call a man your brother everywhere.

4. To bring hope to every task you do,
To dance at a baby's new birth,
To make music in an old man's heart,
And sing to the colors of the earth!

Happy New Year. May you find new meaning, live into your hopes and dreams and know that the God of love and light is always with you. Amen.