

He was in the world, but the world did not know him.

Welcome to the Gospel equivalent of Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it!

We spent four weeks lighting Advent candles talking about the light coming. We read all about the Christmas story and the star. This year we even got the star! For the first time in centuries there was an actual Christmas star (or celestial convergence if you want to be technical). We got what we wanted! The light has come! We got the gift we wanted! But did we?

Sure, we like it. We are Christians for goodness sake, of course we like it, except when we don't.

The light of Christ that comes into the world is honestly, and truthfully inconvenient most of the time.

Sure, the salvation part nice. I do appreciate that, but it's all the rest that I don't particularly care for. I don't want to love my neighbor, did you see the signs in their yard this election? I know that that person could put more in the offering plate, I mean look at how they are dressed. Those people in line at the grocery store using food benefits should just give up their cell phone instead of using my hard-earned tax dollars to eat with.

If you've not said something along those lines, you, and me, have said something else that would go in that paragraph. Because we are human. Because we see those things with the light of the world illuminating our view, not the light of Christ.

The world is full of light. It was early on God's list of things to do. 91.4 million miles away is plenty of light for us to work. We see just fine even in the greyness of Upstate New York winters. And that light shows us just what we choose to see, the corruption, dishonesty, and self-centeredness that humans have become. Or have always been. Paradoxically, the light of our star illuminates the world and the darkness in it.

The light of Christ illuminates the soul and helps us see what we are made to be; children of God, every living, breathing, being on the planet. The people who don't look like us and who do. Those who don't live like us, and those who do. We are all children of God. It's a beautiful thought, until it isn't. Until you realize that the "Those people" of our lives are children of God just as we are. We don't see that with the light of the world. We only see that with the light of Christ.

That's a problem for most of us. Try as we might, we all have that someone whom we just can't love. We just can't get past what they have done, either to us, to themselves, or to someone else. And that line is a moveable one. What one person does we will excuse, but another does the same and we can't find the forgiveness or understanding.

Honestly, it is what has given the church a horrible name over the centuries. Behavior like that is what has made Christian have a negative connotation to many. And everyone of us here is as guilty as the next. We want the light of Christ in the world, but we don't always like what we see when it shines differently than our perceived reality.

The light of Christ can be a bit like light in the middle of the night. You know what I'm talking about. When our first son was born, I smartly installed a rheostat in his room. When he cried for food and diaper, I had preset it to just barely on and could get just enough light to shine to take care of him

without blinding myself or my wife. It was convenient light because I only saw what I wanted to and could return to my blindness easily.

The light of Christ isn't on a rheostat. It shines brightly wherever it shines, and we need that. We need to see clearly what the light of Christ shows us. It shows us exactly what Jesus said it would, it shows us the need for love among us. It shows us those who are hurting and those who are not being treated well by society. It shows us pain and does so in ways that we can't ignore, try though we might.

The true light, which enlightens everyone the Gospel says.

We've worked hard to make that light be on a rheostat, to only let us see what we want to. We have sequestered Jesus inside our houses of worship instead of among the people. When the outside world got scary, we added on to make Family Worship Centers with gymnasiums, meeting rooms, and big kitchens to host our Wednesday night suppers. None of these are bad things, until we forget that the work of God isn't done in this building, it is done when we leave it. That creating space where people must come to God is the very antithesis of Christmas. God Came to US. God took our form and dwelt among us where we were in what ever state we were in. So why do we seem dead set on avoiding the very people that Jesus came to dwell among.

If you look at the Greek of this Gospel, the verb which we translate to say dwelt among them is more accurately translated "tented" among them or "tabernacled" among them. Jesus didn't come to a spot. Jesus came ready to move with the people to be where they were when they needed him.

The light came into the world and for centuries we've been trying to contain it. The church has placed dress codes, barriers, and secret words that are more effective at keeping people out than welcoming them in. If you don't believe me, we are all complicit. We've ALL seen someone and thought "That's not appropriate dress for church." We know the liturgy without thinking about it, so we don't print it in our bulletins, saves paper, but what if a new person shows up? Trust me, growing up evangelical, the first time I went to a liturgical service I was left to wander because everyone had it memorized, but I'm stubborn so I held in there. Others may be less so inclined. We have our pews and we will let you know with a little mini-humph as we walk by that you aren't in your place. I've been the recipient of all of these moments and I'll admit that I've been the giver as well.

The light of Christ in the world shows us everything that the light of the world has made us blind to. It shows us the hungry, I don't recall Jesus asking for proof of need before feeding the five-thousand. It shows us the wayward, I don't recall the part where he tells the woman at the well that she has lived in a way that makes her unworthy of his love. It shows us the need for inclusion, because Jesus never said I can't be at a table with you, not even to Judas.

The light of Christ that we have longed for, that we sing about, and that we desperately need shows us exactly how desperately the world needs it and in seeing that, we have to be the church God is calling us to be, not the Church that is convenient to be. We have to stand up for the oppressed, comfort the ill, and stand by those that no one else is willing to stand by.

Being that church isn't about what we do in worship, it is about what we do the rest of our time. Our faith is not something that we exchange for our coat at the rack on the way out the door only to pick it up on the way back in next Sunday. Our faith is a paradox. Just as we are simultaneously saint and sinner, the light of Christ is both comforting and uncomfortable. It gives us peace but should stir us

serve. The light of Christ both exposes my sin and cleanses it. The light of Christ provides warmth and guidance for me and no matter how much I share it, there is always enough for me and for whomever needs it.

Jesus came and pitched a tent among us. Kind of like a homeless person.... So perhaps that's where I need to remember to be looking for Jesus because I bet he's more comfortable there than in many of our worship facilities.

George McLeod, a Scottish minister put it like this in 1956

*I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin, and in Greek... At the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about. And that is where the church ought to be and what the church ought to be about.*

The light of Christ shows us how much the world needs love and forgiveness, mercy and grace, and it has for centuries and will for centuries more. Christ became flesh because we can't go the other direction. But in his light we see that it is possible to love, heal, and forgive all of those around us. Those we love, those we don't like. Those we chose to join the world and look down on, and even ourselves, when we admit we are as much sinner and saint as the person next to us.

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Thanks be to God for that. Amen.