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The Light of Christmas

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Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Isaiah 11:1-4a; John 1:1-8, 14

Every year when we were growing up, as in many families, decorating the Christmas tree was an annual ritual. The four kids and my mom and dad would all hang our favorite ornaments and work as we listened to Christmas music as we worked.

When we were almost finished, the tinsel would come out of the box where it had been returned carefully the year before, strand by strand. Why purchase new tinsel when it can be re-used? My dad would begin hanging each of the wrinkled, well-used skinny little metallic strips on the tree, piece by piece. The kids would watch, much too impatient to work so slowly.

Finally, my dad would stand back, look at the creation glimmering there in the living room, and declare, *every year*, "Tinsel makes the tree."

We still make – well, *I still make* – that same pronouncement each Christmas in our home today, even though the tinsel long ago gave way to glass and plastic icicles.

It's only now, all these years later, that I've come to realize what the tinsel did, and why we all loved it on the tree, why it *did* "make the tree": *it multiplied the light.*

The light of Christmas is the heart of the story. It has been, really, since the opening lines of Genesis:

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness." (Genesis 1:1-4)

And God separated the light from the darkness. That's it, right there – the sum of our faith. Whatever gloom is in our lives, wherever shadows have fallen across the world, there is a force moving among us that aims to separate the light from the darkness, within each of us, and within our world.

God *begins* by hanging the tinsel, and *the light is multiplied in the darkness.*

The story of Christmas may be told in many different ways.

There's the commercialized version of the season or the one that focuses on political fights over public nativity scenes or whether we can say "Merry Christmas" or not – all of which is so tiring.

Christmas as we know it today was largely invented in 19th century Victorian England by Charles Dickens, with an assist from 16th century Germany, in the matter of the tree, and a 3rd century supportive role played by an obscure Greek bishop named Nicholas, who later became a saint.

The Santa Claus version of Christmas is not my favorite – although this year I’m tempted by it, after several weeks of watching our neighbors’ 15-foot tall inflated, well-lit Santa dancing in the evening breeze in their front yard, next to the inflated reindeer and inflated snow man and inflated airplane piloted by yet another inflated Santa. I’m actually starting to enjoy the strange little seasonal scene I look out on each night.

Even the Bible has its differing versions - although neither has anything inflated in it.

The *most familiar* is how Luke tells it – the Angel Gabriel, Mary and Joseph, and a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, “the cattle lowing” as the poor baby wakes – or is that only in a favorite Christmas carol?

Then there’s the heavenly host visiting shepherds out in the fields “keeping watch over their flock by night.” Throw in the wise men from *Matthew’s* version and we have the making of a perfect pageant to serve up on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, as happened earlier today.

This Covid Christmas we out-sourced the pageant to the children of the church, working from their homes. Last year we had a minor crisis when all the homemade halos went missing – and they’re still not to be found. Those little circles of light are a key part of the angelic outfit. Somehow, they still managed to produce a wonderful, joyful, slightly chaotic, digital version of the familiar story. I encourage you to watch it on the Westminster web site, in the worship archive.

According to Luke, the most important part of the story is the baby. How could it be Christmas without “gentle Mary laying her child lowly in a manger?”

But that’s precisely what happens in the alternative version, where the baby is missing. There are no angels or shepherds, no Holy Family, not even a *little town of Bethlehem*, because this telling of Christmas is not bound by something as confining as geography.

Call it the *theological* version of the story. It doesn’t care, really, about the specifics of venue or timing or the cast of characters. It’s how John tells it, decades after the other gospels. By the time of John’s version, people have moved on from the various details – those inflated aspects of Christmas over which we and our children and the market economy obsess today.

What concerns John and the early church by the turn of that first century is *what it all means*. The fourth gospel wants its readers to explore the deeper significance of incarnation. *How* it happened

or *where* it happened is not the point. *That* it happened, *is*.

Honestly, this year it has taken so long to get to Christmas and it has been so hard for all of us, that I find *myself* less concerned about the particulars. I'm ready for an incarnation of the heart, an enfleshing of love that breaks forth *somewhere* in this weary world, a sign of the promise that hope is on the way.

Much of this year it has felt as if we were in Lent, working through that grim season of penance, shuffling toward the cross. With the ravages of Covid and the scourge of racial injustice and our unrelenting national anger, we have been looking into the abyss. But now, with the solstice of bleak midwinter, I realize it's not been *Lent*: this year we've been making our way *through Advent* these many, long, terrible months.

The ancient seer knew it all along: *The people who walked in darkness*, he said. The prophet saw it coming: *Those who lived in a land of deep darkness* – somehow, Isaiah knew what we would face. To borrow from William Butler Yeats, we've been *slouching toward Bethlehem* all this time.

To hear the words of John sends a bolt through our long night: "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." (John 1:3b-5)

No matter which way we tell the story, that's the heart of it: *Christmas brings light into the world*. Every version is about the presence of light. Remember those living in a land of deep darkness? They've seen a great light. Remember the shepherds? They saw the glory of God. Remember the magi? They saw the star. And remember that Christmas pageant? They made new halos.

Why use candles in an Advent wreath if not to remind us that the light grows brighter as we move deeper into the dark? Even the inflated Santa is really about the light that shines within it. They don't blow it up until it's dark.

In the fourth century the church was grappling with this issue, about who Jesus was. So they gathered in a Council in Nicaea and wrote a new statement of faith, the Nicene Creed. They were looking for the right words to describe Jesus, and it was not easy. There was no mention of Mary or Bethlehem or a manger. They finally settled simply on "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

Jesus, as *Light from Light*.

We can't get to Christmas without the light. It shines – *and it is not overcome*. The light has been breaking in since the beginning, and it is everywhere. No shadow, no gloom, no distress, no despair, no injustice, no pandemic, no hatred, can withstand the light forever.

If we let it shine into our lives, then, like tinsel on the tree, we begin, you and I, to multiply the light – and that’s why we rejoice this night.

Merry Christmas – and thanks be to God for the Light of the world.

Amen.