

Vicar James Miller
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/25/2015, Christmas Morning
John 1: 1-14

“Yet in Thy dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I bring good news, in fact the best possible news! For today, we celebrate the event that changed the world: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born in Bethlehem! We just sang about this in our hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem, and if you would like a title to my sermon, it would be the line, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.” I think this relates to the fifth verse of St. John’s gospel, and that’s what I want to lift up to you this morning. :

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

We begin by considering the first portion: “The light shines”. Notice, there is no qualification. It does not say, “The light shone”, which is the past tense and would mean that it once was shining, but is not anymore. This light is not a light that might shine or will shine in the future. No. It shines: then, now, always, and forever! Like the line in the hymn, it is the Everlasting Light!

Let us now move forward in the verse with this everlasting light. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” So, apparently there has been a struggle, a conflict, and there has been an outcome; a final result: The light has won! The darkness has not covered it up, snuffed it out, eclipsed the light. No. It tried, but the light has won. The light shines in spite of all the attempts and efforts of darkness to overcome it. Though the darkness is present, the light continues to shine.

Furthermore, notice that there is no qualifier to this second part of the verse. It does not say, “the darkness has *not yet* overcome it”, as though there is a chance for that to happen. Jesus was crucified, was dead, and was buried, but God Raised Him on the third day, according to Scripture and He lives and reigns today! So, this is a finished, accomplished fact: the light shines and continues to shine and the darkness cannot stop it.

Now that we see the relationship between the two elements of the verse: light and darkness, let us take a closer look at each one.

We all recognize that the words of St. John parallel the story of Creation found in the Book of Genesis. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and *darkness* was upon the face of the deep.” So from the beginning, there was darkness, and God was not satisfied. This had to change. What happened? God *spoke*.

These were the first *words* of God: “Let there be light”. It was God’s will that something should overcome the darkness. That something was *light*. This *light* was created by God by His *Word*.

Now St. John tells us in verse 1 that God, our creator, used the Word to defeat darkness and that very Word *was with* God and the very Word *was* God. That Word, which was God's first action, which set everything into motion, and which was God's desire, was *light*. God desired light. God *is* light.

It is important to recognize that there *is* a difference between this desire of God: light, and that which had sought to overcome it: darkness. St. John is not vague. There are no gradations when it comes to light and darkness. There are no nuances here.

Yet, our modern society seems to question such clear distinctions and seems to call into question whether there is such a thing as right and wrong; light and darkness. Our society seems to take pleasure in looking for shadows in how the Church teaches about light based upon scripture. In fact, even within the Church itself, there are those who seem to even be questioning whether there really is light; whether there is a purity in light which is God's desire, and whether this purity of light: holiness, is actually God's desire for us. There are those in the Church who even wonder if there is a difference between light and darkness, and worse yet, whether this matters at all.

I recently attended a gathering where the participation in what was labeled as "street economy": prostitution and drug trafficking, was upheld as one's personal right, as opposed to being a criminal act. Believe it or not, this position is actually supported by some churches.

St. John sees things differently. For him, there is light and there is darkness. God dwells in the light. God does not dwell in darkness. Darkness has not overcome the light. The light shines!

I want to turn to a last aspect of this verse, that of the light continuing to shine, no matter what darkness has been present, because I want to celebrate the hope which is the most important part of the celebration of the birth of Jesus. So, let us turn to look at some instances in history.

After the fall of Rome, Europe was indeed thrown into darkness. There was lawlessness. Attacking tribes from the East pillaged and burned. They gained control of the best accomplishments of civilization produced by the Roman Empire. Commerce, a system of justice, and most importantly, education, were all cast into turmoil. And this was no short-lived event. This lasted for several hundred years. Darkness.

Yet, the light was shining. In monasteries far from the eastern attackers, in remote corners of Scotland and Ireland, Christian monks labored away in cold stone cells and abbeys, copying and preserving not only Scripture and the writings of the early Church, but also the treasures of western secular civilization: works of Aristotle, Plato, and Pythagoras. While the rest of Europe was in darkness, and there seemed to be no hope at all for an improved future, the light of God was shining.

There was a similar darkness in our own recent past which threatened the future of civilization: Germany's Third Reich and Adolf Hitler. They promised a new future for the world and in trying to bring this about, millions of innocent people were put to death. All intellectual and creative activity was monitored and directed toward the success of this monstrous machine. Even the Church was pressured to cooperate. Yet, the light was still shining and was not overcome. That light was shining in Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the

Confessing Church he founded in defiance. Though this cost him his life, the light was not overcome. Hitler was defeated.

Let's take a moment to look right here at our own church's history. As Father Thomas Green pointed out in a sermon here last year, the founding of our congregation was a shining light during a great period of darkness. Our nation was in the midst of a civil war. Who knew what the outcome would be? In fact, for the first several years of the war, President Lincoln and the Union forces seemed to be unable to preserve the Union. Our very congregation was a shining light in that darkness. Finally, the war ended. Slavery was abolished. The nation was preserved. Darkness had not overcome the light. One hundred fifty years later, forced with the enormity of replacing our slate roof, the light again was shining. We raised the nearly 2 million dollars which were necessary to complete that task. The darkness has not overcome the light.

There is no denying that there continues to be darkness in this world. Terrorism is a very real and present threat. It seems to be spreading like a cancer. There are other problems in our society which go beyond the acceptance of "street economy" which I mentioned earlier, which could be thought of collectively as moral relativism: the lack of distinction between light and darkness. Against that backdrop of darkness, though, I want to offer you some examples of light, of hope, which I have experienced at United Lutheran Church at The Wartburg where I am serving as Vicar.

A couple of weeks ago they held their annual Christmas concert on a mid-week morning, so that all the residents and patients could attend. Let me list some of the examples of shining light:

The chapel was full, actually bursting, and equally balanced between those who were ambulatory and those using wheelchairs and walkers.

The Wartburg Choir, including our own member, Kathryn Weidmann, sang six songs. This choir is mostly made up of residents from the Wartburg Nursing Home, whose health is frail. Most must use wheelchairs or walkers to get around. Yet, there was *great joy* in their singing and all the audience certainly felt it.

The Chapel School Choir of Village Lutheran Church sang several songs. The Chapel School is operated by Village Lutheran Church in Bronxville. These 32 young ladies and gentlemen sang beautifully. They sang of Jesus. They sang of the light. They represent our future. The light shines in and through them.

My final example of the light shining took place this last Sunday in our morning worship service at United Lutheran church. The Wartburg Chime Choir played "Of the Father's Love Begotten" (LBW 42). The text of this hymn dates from the 4th century and the melody they played dates from the 14th century. I want you to pause and picture this: Each member of this choir is confined to a wheel chair. Many are victims of a stroke and have severe limitations as a result. Yet, aside from their own darkness, the light was shining, and continues to shine, just as the last words of every verse of this ancient hymn say: Evermore and Evermore.

Our member Jeff Rudat mentioned to Pastor Fryer that because of the scaffolding for our roof project, two trees have died in the front of our church. They withered up and died because they did not have light. This can happen to us. Our own souls will wither

without the light of Jesus. In our own “little towns of Bethlehem”, on our own dark streets, there shines an everlasting light. That light is God’s love for us. That light shines, and the darkness has not overcome it.

For today we have a celebration: God has come amongst us: Immanuel! The light shines! Our hope is born in Jesus, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit we give all glory and honor. Amen.