

The True Christmas Light

John 1:1-13

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

December 1, 2013

I betcha, when you think of Christmas, you think of light. Or maybe, *lights*. They're all up now, everywhere you look, the shopping centers, the stores, the downtown streets, especially on houses. Have you put up your lights yet? How much of a labor of love was it? When I see those houses with gazillions of lights, displays of the nativity, Christmas Carols playing, I know it was a labor of love. And you can't help but be drawn to those lights. They're so bright and colorful, they're just a celebration of lights. Never mind that people risk life and limb going up on ladders, climbing up onto the roof, trying to hang lights from all kinds of places. How many of you all have ever fallen off of a ladder stringing up Christmas lights? You've gotta really love those lights to keep on doing it year after year. They must mean *something*.

You know, our Jewish friends have their Hanukkah celebration going on now, and it's also a celebration of lights. They love the lights, too. It's all about a miraculous light long ago.

A miraculous light long ago... Most folks think that we get the whole light thing from the *miraculous light* the shepherds saw in the night sky, with all those bright angels, on the night Jesus was born. Some consider the star that guided the three wise men, and think this symbolism of light must come from that. Well, the connection between Jesus's birth and light goes much deeper than just that. John the gospel writer believed that Jesus was the *glory* of God revealed to us – and *glory* means *light*. That's why he wrote this beautiful Prologue to his Gospel, all about the light coming into the

world. If you pay close enough attention to the words, you can see the other Gospels birth stories reflected here. John is trying to tell us what the true light really is.

See, what we celebrate at Christmastime, in Advent leading up to Christmas, is a *birth*, a coming of life. And not just any birth, but the birth of the Son of God. John wants to tell us that Jesus was *really* born, but that's not all: "*What has come into being in him was life...*" That goes beyond Jesus being a real human being; it's about life that goes on beyond life, that conquers the darkness, the evil in the world. More on that later.

People needed a signal that this life had come. Bright lights in a night sky do the trick nicely, just as Luke says. When John writes, "*The light shines in the darkness...*" he tells us that the giver of life has been born; but more than that: despite the odds, he has made it to us because the darkness – evil – wasn't able to stop him. John puts it this way: "*...the darkness did not overcome it.*" That reference to darkness, of course, was also a reference to the powers of evil of this world, the evil that tried to overcome Jesus at the end of his life. They thought they had done it, but they didn't; in fact, they played right into his hands. Jesus used their evil – their darkness – to assure his victory, the victory of light and life. That reference to darkness here also might have reflected the fact that Jesus was born in darkness, at night. The shepherds had his coming revealed to them in darkness; so did the magi, the wise men; Mary and Joseph had visions at night, while they were dreaming, and angel visitations, also at night. You could surely say, all of those events were "lights shining in darkness," pointing to the one true light, Jesus. There's one answer to why people might want to put up gazillions of lights

at Christmas. They're like a replay of the light overcoming the darkness all over again. When I was a kid, back there in the late 60s and early 70s, before the energy crisis jacked up the price of electricity, starting about the first of December there was a glow in the night over most of the neighborhoods around where I lived. It was all those Christmas lights, literally overcoming the darkness.

John the Baptist, says our writer, came to witness to the light; but so did those shepherds, and those wise men, too. And what did the wise men and the shepherds say? The wise men recognized Jesus as Israel's real king; the shepherds, as the Messiah, which also means "king.". In fact, after the shepherds had visited Jesus, they went around witnessing to everyone they met! They were witnessing like crazy to the light. Have you ever thought that our lights adorning our houses are a witness, too? They are! They tell everyone about the light that has come into the world. They tell everyone about what we believe and who we believe in. Have you ever seen an atheist decorate their house for Christmas? Of course not! So when you put up lights, you're bearing witness to the true light. We have to say, like John, that we are NOT the light, that we are just bearing witness to it.

Now we shift a bit to some other reflections of John, really more like "foreshadowings," and though things will get darker, the brilliance of this light come into the world only grows brighter. In verse 9 our gospel writer makes the statement: "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*" The meaning of "enlighten" as "give knowledge to" holds true in the original language as well as in our

modern language, so here we must be talking about Jesus' teaching. He certainly did leave us with quite a body of teaching! In fact, it was his primary thing throughout his ministry. Just about every healing event was preceded by, or came in the middle of, Jesus doing some teaching. And later in John, Jesus would say of himself, "I am the light of the world." If you take enlighten to mean "teach about," then we ought to be teaching the world about Jesus, too, because it seems like we're entering into a new age of darkness ourselves. Think about the darkness, the evil, you've seen, maybe not in person, but you certainly know about it. People shooting up malls and schools; constant stories on the news about abused and neglected children; things like ethnic cleansing; on and on. You know, more than ever, it seems that the world needs to know about this light that means life – and salvation.

Yet, in spite of all this light, John says this: "...*the world did not know him.*" Add on to that verse 11, how he came to his own people but "*his own people did not accept him*" and you see that John is looking forward to the very end, Jesus' crucifixion and death. Jesus' teaching was authentic to the people's scriptures; he knew their lives because he was one of them, you could tell it by the parables he taught. There was no doubt he had the power of God, to heal and inspire. But his own people couldn't free themselves of their own prejudices, their own habits, their own false hopes. It's as if the light was too bright! – and people had to snuff it out, turn it off, because they *weren't used to* its brilliance. It was too many lights on the little Christmas trees of their lives! – and they didn't like it, it wasn't the way they'd done Christmas trees before. Maybe it

wasn't the kind of light they wanted, anyway. You know how hard it is to get people to change their ways! That might be the biggest challenge to the church today; we're faced with a society that does not know Jesus, not really, and doesn't seem to care. Sad to say, but for the most part our society has not accepted him, even though I doubt there are very many people who don't know that he died on a cross. That's part of why I love Christmas so much. When we witness to the world, by the putting up of Christmas lights, we're taking the first steps to free people from their own prejudices, their own habits, their own false hopes. We're taking the first steps towards helping *them* become children of light.

We know that they *did* try to snuff out this light, this life. In the end they found out: this was an eternal light that God would *never* let go out! God would never let the powers of darkness – evil – extinguish it. And to all those who wanted to bask in that light, who, instead of trying to snuff it out, wanted to *reflect* it, God granted the status of children, children of God, who would never die, just as the light would never die. That might not have been the kind of light the PEOPLE expected or even wanted, but it was the kind God in his grace gave, not just to those people of old, but to all of us. Not only that, but God made life with him so attractive that we have all been drawn to the light, and we all want to have that light, and therefore we have indeed become children of light – children of God. By the grace of God, we see it as the kind of light we want, and the kind we *refuse* to live without.

So now you know why we have all those lights! And colors! They represent the beauty, and attractiveness, of the one true light, Jesus Christ. They remind us of the glory of God. They serve as witness to the world that the darkness has been overcome, and that *everyone* can come to this light. Just as we are drawn towards the beauty of those Christmas lights, so are we drawn towards Jesus, the true light, and in that being drawn, we are healed. We are saved! Our lives are made whole. What we can do to make the season complete, is to make ourselves that light for others, so colorful and beautiful, that *they* will be drawn to the one true light, too. And then they'll find their place, basking in the light of the family of God.

Enjoy the lights all around you, and take to heart what they really mean. Put up your own lights, lots of 'em! – on your house and in your heart, so others can see, and be drawn to our Lord. Let the light cast away all the darkness in your life, as all of us prepare our hearts, and others' hearts, for his coming. The light has come into the world! All praise be to God.