

Light in the Darkness

John 1:1-5

Introduction

Advent Series: New Advent series (e.g., a season and posture of the heart more than a “celebration” *per se*). Last year (promise of Messiah in Isaiah which went nicely with the fulfillment theme in Matthew). What are we going to look at this year? OT last year, Gospel this year. **Matthew and Luke tell the facts of Christmas** (e.g., wise men, shepherds, manger, swaddling clothes, etc.). **John tells the meaning of Christmas.**

Past the Nostalgia: Confession: I love the Christmas season. I like the traditions, the decorations, the music. I think it is not only *acceptable* but *advisable* to listen to “Christmas music” all year round.

- “Baby elephants are born weighing approximately 250 pounds, making them the world's biggest babies, right next to people who complain about others celebrating Christmas too early.” No, my lights are not up *too* early. No, it is not *too* early to watch *Jingle All the Way*. Yes, I would have my tree up before Thanksgiving if I could guarantee all the needles wouldn't fall off before Christmas. Why do you want to quench my joy (*Dad*)?

But we need to be careful that we don't just **settle for nostalgia**. Let's not trade the depth of the celebration of the Savior for the trappings of the season. Enjoy the traditions but don't settle for too little.

Light in the Dark: Sparkly lights are a hallmark of the season (and create quite the magical ambiance). But lights **aren't primarily for decoration, they have a purpose** (to see in the dark). My kids spent the night at their grandparents house the other day and my mom told me that right after she put them to bed she heard from upstairs the (adorable) voice of our two-year-old, Joshua, saying, “Grandma, I need you.” When she looked up the stairwell into the dark hallway she saw him with two plug-in emergency night lights (air traffic controller style). It was dark and he was trying to escape. My two year old understands this simple truth: “No matter what you want to do in a room, you have to first turn on the light, or you can't see to do anything else. Christmas contains many spiritual truths, but it will be hard to grasp the others unless we grasp this one first: the world is a dark place, and we will never find our way or see reality unless Jesus is our Light.”

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.¹

¹ Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. ² οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. ³ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν ⁴ ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· ⁵ καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν.

Main Point: The central point of this section is found in verse 5: ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The light wins, the light triumphs over darkness (overcome/triumph not understand/comprehend).²

The Worry: The threat, when we look around, is that the darkness is going to win.

- For example, **suicide** is the 2nd leading cause of death of people age 10-34 and the 4th among individuals between 35-54. There were more than 2.5x as many suicides (48,344) in the U.S. as homicides (18,830).

What is darkness from a biblical perspective? Darkness is evil that is brought on by sin.

- We live in a broken world full of evil. Evil is the opposite of God's plan ("God is light," 1 Jn 1:5). "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19).
- John gives us this reminder because darkness appears to be winning (but isn't).
- If we are going to reflect the light of Jesus, then we must be connected to Jesus as our source of light (e.g., more light, more surface area touching darkness; turning the light on reveals the mess in your bedroom).

What is the light?: What is the light that will overcome the darkness and lead us out of the shadows of death and despair? "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). Jesus = light (interchangeable).

Light Wins: When I walk in the room, I am confident that, when I flip the switch the lights will come on and the darkness will go away. The light never loses to the dark (darkness is not a thing, it is the absence of light; evil is not a thing, it is the absence or perversion of good, etc.)

- John wants us to know, believe, have confidence, feel (deep in our souls), and trust that Jesus, our light, overcomes the darkness. **Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness.**

The point of verses 1-4 is to explain to us *why Jesus is the one that can overcome the darkness?* These verses explain why we can have confidence that Jesus wins. They explain the power he has to banish the darkness. We can have confidence that Jesus overcomes the darkness because (1) he is the Word of God, (2) the agent of creation, and (3) brings life.

1. Jesus is the Word of God ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. Jesus is the very self-disclosure, the revelation of God.

Know Someone: How do you know someone? You can infer from observation (e.g., Do you like tea or coffee? See me drinking coffee and *assume* I'm a coffee person but, when you ask me, you find out I was only drinking coffee because there was no tea I liked and I was up late

² A few translations use the word "understand" or "comprehend" (the darkness does not understand/comprehend it"). Most modern translations rightly translate it as overcome. Following NIDNTTE, καταλαμβάνω, is used 13x in NT (15 if *Pericope de Adulterae* is included). Almost always used to mean "seize, overtake, overcome, take hold of." Only consistently used to mean comprehension/understanding in the middle voice (not in John 1:5).

with my kids. When you ask me, that's when you find out the truth, through my words). But observation is not the best way of knowing.

- When we say we “met” someone, what do we mean? We spoke to them. We communicated with them. We heard their opinions, preferences, and self-description.
 - Some smart-alecs in the crowd are thinking, but people communicate in other ways (e.g., body language, tone, etc.). Thank you, you're actually continuing to make my point!
 - Jesus is the Word made flesh, he is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15a).
- You and I can only fully know God through Jesus, his Word. We can infer some things about God from observation but can only “meet God” through Jesus.
 - Jesus is God's divine self-expression, self-disclosure; he is the speech of God.
 - The Psalmists and prophets hint at this when they speak about the word of God in “close-to” personal terms,³ all pointing to Jesus as the embodied Word of God (Ridderbos).

How Does Someone Know God: The typical instincts are either mysticism or rationalism (let me explain).

- **Mysticism:** That God can only be grasped or apprehended in a supernatural, spiritual way beyond the intellect (i.e., non-rational)
- **Rationalism:** Believes that all knowledge is based on reason rather than experience (i.e., non-mystical)

Philosophy 101 will disabuse you of both of these mistakes. Regarding **mysticism**, while spiritual reality and transcendent experience are a part of union with God, and knowing God is beyond our ability to fully understand, God is not *only* an emotional and mystical experience. Truth is not merely relative. God has spoken in understandable terms, there is consistent *logic* (i.e., λόγος). But even **rationalism** has its limits. Descartes started with the premise “I think, therefore I am” placing our ability to understand through our rational faculties. And we *can* know some things about God (properly understood there are a lot of rational evidences for God). However, the idea that we can use our cognitive faculties to prove the fundamental nature of understanding via our cognitive faculties is not only circular, it underestimates our limits, biases, and the effect of sin in our reasoning processes.

- Both of these paths offer *some* information about God and have *some* Biblical support. But what keeps our spiritual approaches from becoming merely emotionalism and our rationalism from devolving confirmation bias.
 - There are no slam-dunk, water-tight **arguments** to know God (because of our epistemological limits there are none of these arguments for anything).
 - God has given us a slam-dunk, water-tight person.
- In the darkness, in response to our questions, God doesn't give us a mystical experience or a logical rationale; he gives us a person! He gives us Jesus.
- Don't just trust your feelings, follow Jesus. Don't just follow your intellect, follow Jesus. He is the logic and Word of God.

³ Ps 33:6; 107:20; 147:15; Isa 55:10-11

Knowing God: “We can only know God through God.” We can only truly learn about God from God. In fact, we can only truly know ourselves through God. We don’t deduce or figure him out.

- “We long to know who God is and what God thinks and does. In Jesus, his most personal Word, God has ‘spoken’ to us in the most human way possible, giving us his innermost thoughts and heart, in deeds that are as profound as his words.” (Bruner).
- “Do you want to know what God is like? Do you want to know what God does, how he feels, what he delights in, what he is harsh toward? Look to Jesus” (Chandler).
 - Jesus is God made visible.

God Himself: What is the nature of this Word? If the Word is in the beginning it either *is* God or is *with* God. John says **both**. The Word is God himself (that’s why he has the power to overcome the darkness).

Trinitarian Theology: A lot of people get hung up on this point (the Word was with God, and the Word was God). This is the dividing line for us and most false religions. They can imagine that Jesus is the supreme creation of God, a great prophet of his word, but they can’t agree with the teaching of the Bible that Jesus is God (so they mistranslate, ignore, or “fix” this verse but it’s plainly there). That there is one God in three persons (Father, Son, and Spirit). And this verse hints at that very nature when it explains the Son of God as the Word of God, distinct in personhood and yet fully God. Explained clearly that the Word is divine and yet distinct from God (*is* God and is *with* God).

- The Word does not arise later in time (begotten not made). It is eternal like God (if the Son is not eternal then God is not eternally Father).

In the Beginning: ¹ **In the beginning** was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was **in the beginning** with God. In the beginning **was God** and only God (so if the Word was also in the beginning then he was God. “Within the sphere of this creation there is, then, no time which is not enclosed by the eternity of the Word, no space which does not have its origin in its omnipresence and which is not for this reason conditioned by it” (Barth).⁴

- When Jesus returns, riding on a white horse, to judge the world: “He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God” (Rev 19:13).

Why Does the Darkness Flee?: What does the Word of God do to darkness “in the beginning.” When God speaks, light dispels the darkness (“let there be light”). Light and darkness are not opposites anymore than good and evil are opposites. That’s why darkness can’t win. Darkness is not equal in strength to light, it is the *absence* of light. The light of Christ *always* dispels the darkness, the only way for darkness to overcome is for us to quench the light.

2. Jesus is the Agent of Creation ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

⁴ Quite a nuanced description of the word. Distinction of persons (to use later verbage) by not using a definite article before God (keeps some distance). Also doesn’t use the word for divine (theios). This description shows the distinction but the shared essence of the Word and the Father.

Creator: God is often described as the creator, but here (as in other places) we see that God the Father is not the only one active in the creative enterprise. “God created the heavens and the earth.” God the Father is the source, in some sense, but the Son is the one who carries out the plans (e.g., architect, contractor, mortgage broker, homeowner, workers, etc.).

Colossians 1: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:15-20).

- Everything that was made was made through him, so he can't have been made.
 - **Since he created all things, he is in control of all things** (e.g., wind and the waves obey him).
 - **Since he created all things, all things exist for him.**
 - **Since he created all things, he is superior to all of creation.**

Worshipping Created Things: One of the descriptions of wickedness and sin in Romans 1 is exchanging the worship of the Creator for the creature. This is the essence of idolatry, placing a created thing, person, or idea (good or bad) on the throne that only the uncreated God should occupy. “Whatever happiness we may find in our idols is temporary and fleeting. It's like the crash following a sugar rush, or the doldrums of January following the excitement of Christmas. In the end, our idols will fail us... Because we were created to worship God alone, as long as we seek after false gods, we will feel a constant dissatisfaction, a lingering discontentment.” (Christina Fox).

- The foolishness of idolatry is the weakness of the idol (it is a created thing). I should not be surprised when it fails me; it can't give me the hope, purpose, joy, and love found in Christ alone.

Examples of Idolatry:

- Politics: “Some [folks] (we hope) [will] come back from the far country of political obsession, devastated that their idols failed them and perhaps ashamed they went all-in on empty promises” (Jared Wilson).
 - Since, “I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found” (Nouwen).
 - If they come back “[my] job is not to add to their shame, to bury them in ‘I told you so’s,’ nor celebrate and mock their disappointment or humiliation, but instead to gladly run to receive them and joyfully embrace them. [Waiting now] with grace at the ready” (Jared Wilson).
- Romance: “I realized that for years I'd thought of love as something that would complete me, make all my troubles go away. I worshiped at the altar of romantic completion. And it cost me plenty of times. And it cost most of the girls I'd dated, too, because I wanted them to be something they couldn't be. It's too much pressure to put on a person... I

think that's why so many couples fight, because they want their partners to validate them and affirm them, and if they don't get that, they feel as though they're going to die. And so they lash out. But it's a terrible thing to wake up and realize the person you just finished crucifying didn't turn out to be Jesus" (Miller).

- Only Jesus can handle the "pressure" of perfection and fulfilling the longing for perfect love.

What are you trusting in for hope, peace, purpose, and fulfillment instead of Jesus?

Power to Make and Remake: For those stuck in darkness, slaves to sin, overcome by the shadow of death, we don't need a *distraction* from our problem we need a Savior sufficiently strong to create light in the dark, to give life to the dead. This verse reminds us that, **if he has the power to make everything, he has the power to remake everything** (e.g., furniture maker (Uncle Harold) can remake what is broken). The one who created us promises to recreate us if we'd trust in him.

- "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:26).
- "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

First Place: All of this reinforces what Paul told us earlier (Col 1) that Jesus is "preeminent," he has "first place" in all things. Therefore, he should have first place in our lives and hearts.

- If your career is the god of your life, then something terrible occurs within you when things go badly at work. If your career, however, is simply a part of God's plan and you keep it in proper perspective, you can handle a demotion just as well as you can handle a promotion.
- If Jesus does not have priority over everything in your life, then your priorities are not in the proper order (e.g., job, hobbies, family, dreams, desires, etc.).

3. Jesus Brings Life ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Life: God is life (just the way he is). Life comes from God. One of the basic, profound differences between atheists and theists, is that atheists believe that inanimate matter and energy eternally existed and then, somehow, life came from that. But that doesn't make sense. What makes sense is what the Bible teaches, that before there was any matter there was God, and life came from him!

Sin Brings Death, Jesus Brings Life: Like we said, darkness (here) is not "literal" darkness, but evil, brokenness, and corruption that comes as the result of sin. Our sinful condition draws us into darkness.

- "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23).
- "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (Jas 1:14-15).

Therefore, light (here) is not literal but the new life Jesus offers when he rescues us from sin and gives us new hearts. The picture of salvation is the moment “the light goes on,” when God takes us from death to life.

- “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone” (Is 9:2).
- “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8).

Life = sight; death = blindness/darkness

- The life that Jesus brings, lights the way. When Jesus gives us life, it enables us to see, to grasp, to understand (we’ve been stumbling around in the dark, Jesus walks in and turns the lights on).
- Without Jesus there is no life; without Jesus there is no sight (this is why some people “seeing they didn’t see” and “hearing they didn’t hear”).

Conclusion

Light in the Darkness: Isaiah describes the coming of the savior as a “light in the darkness.” Imagine you’re lost in the woods overnight. Everything is dim. You are stumbling trying to find your way out. The world is blurry shadows, frightful sounds, and uncertain steps. The lostness of that moment is accompanied by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. All until the sun comes up. When the sun breaks the horizon and light floods the forest floor, all of the scary noises, uncertain pathways, and dangerous shadows are revealed to be what they are. Such is the incarnation, such is Christmas.

- “The Christmas story is really a light story. Not the lights that decorate our city or the lights you’ve hung on the tree in your living room, or the candles that you’ve placed in your windows. This story is about the light coming into a world that had been sadly cast into darkness; under the burden of rebellion and sin, the world had become a dark place. In the darkness of immorality, injustice, violence, greed, self-righteousness, thievery, racism, and a host of other ills, the world was desperate for light. **Everyone was part of the problem and everyone suffered from the problem, but no one could solve the problem.** God’s solution was the only way. He sent the One who is light to be the light that would light the world by his grace. He came into the darkness so that we could know light and life forever. Here is the Christmas story—only light can defeat the darkness, and light has come!”

Light is Hope: Be of good courage because Christ (our light) has overcome the darkness (of the world). There is hope and promise in this reminder. “*Hope and promise* are at the center of the Advent proclamation.” Saying “let us,” “we are called to,” and “will we” can be self-defeating because, if we’re not already doing that, how do we start. But here we have a promise “made to [you] by God who, unlike human beings, keeps his promises” (Jenson).

What Does It Look Like to Live In This Promise?: Look to Jesus with hope and anticipation. “What doesn’t make sense with insight now will make sense with hindsight later” (Pinckney). We allow Jesus to illuminate our path and enliven our hearts.

- The reality of his incarnation and the promise of his return lifts our weary spirits. Life is hard, we all suffer: “Our choice isn’t between suffering and not suffering, it’s between suffering with hope and suffering without hope” (Daniel Simmons).
- The reminder of his coming and the promise of his return also reminds us that there is light even in the dark moments.

Even though it might **seem dark now**, I can wait with anticipation and cling to the promise that the darkness will not overcome the light.