

Christmas Eve - All Things New: How the Light Comes

Luke 2:1-14

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

I spent 25 years of my life living in Alaska. And I loved most of it. Moose walking through the lanes at traffic lights, bears meandering through our neighborhood at times, the fiercely independent frontier spirit and the extra daylight in the summer. The sun would set around midnight and rise around 3am. It was impossible to get kids to go to sleep in the summer but people could grow incredible vegetables!

The one part that wasn't easy was the darkness. By the winter solstice, sunrise was 10:15am and sunset was 3:45pm. That was in Anchorage. My friends in Barrow, at the very top point of Alaska, had it even worse than us. The sun would set November 18 and wouldn't rise until January 23. 67 days of darkness!

Could you imagine that? What would daily life feel like to be in the dark for a straight two months? Besides taking a ton of vitamin D and having a light lamp, I'm guessing you would simply get used to it. Or vacation in Hawaii!

Sometimes, I wonder how much we do that in life when it comes to our heart. Difficult things happen, they feel out of our control, we don't know how to respond...so we get used to the darkness. We don't question it much. It feels so big and heavy that we can't even imagine how to look around it, through it or under it. Let alone move it.

Tonight, we're going to look at what it means for Jesus to be a light in our world. I'll share some thoughts about how the light comes to us. We'll wonder about where God invites us to share this light with our world and I'll end with a reflection called, "How the Light Comes." Then we'll light some candles and welcome Christ into our midst.

I met with someone this past Tuesday and she gave me permission to share her reflections with you tonight. This woman's grandchild passed away three months ago and it's been a very difficult season. She's doing lots of grief counseling and therapy but feels like there's a strength that's missing. She mentioned she's watched other friends go through difficult things and their faith carried them through. She wondered aloud if that's what was missing from her life right now. This woman has looked deeply at her life and does not want to get used to the darkness.

Later in Jesus' life he's with a group of religious leaders and they're trying to get him to prove who he really is. And Jesus says, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12).*"

I've tried many times to simply be a positive person and hope that's all I needed to figure out my life. It works for a little bit but then I descend back into a bit of darkness. But there is something different about the light of Jesus Christ. It's not just wishful thinking or a positive attitude. This light is strong, deep, gracious and relentless. It continues to gently beckon me out of my darkness and into the light. Into hope, into second and 40th chances, and into love.

At Christmas, we celebrate the light of Jesus coming to be with us in a way we could understand. It wasn't just words or prayers or a hope anymore. It was a flesh and blood, incarnational, sitting right next to me kind of thing. **The light arrived in a way we could understand.** No longer was love a concept. It was now something we could hold and interact with and learn from. I don't know about you this year, but I need more of that in my life.

And how did the light come on the first night?

- Not according to plan
- The light was surprising and a bit scary
- The light was good news
- People were told to go and see the light

So the question must be asked of each of us. **Where do we need some light right now?** Is there a place in your life where it feels like the end...all possibilities have been explored...you don't know what to do anymore? You've hit the wall one too many times.

Good news. Those are the **exact places** the light of Christ loves to be invited.

Because here are some things I've picked up about the light of Christ over the years.

The light comes when we don't expect it.

When we're going about our business - stuck in a rut - dying inside because we don't like our job - struggling under a mountain of debt - in a marriage that's not working a lot of the time - in a season of tough parenting moments - and even when life is going along pretty well - the light comes when we don't expect it.

The light of Christ breaks the rules.

The light crosses lines - because there were people on the other side of all the lines we try to draw. That's why we as Jesus followers, do not draw lines to keep people out. We cross lines to bring people in. That's who we are. (Groeschel)

The light can be terrifying.

Becoming a whole person is terrifying. To say to the One who made us, "you have full access to my life, God. Show me what needs to go and what needs to stay and needs to get stronger." Not easy. But life changing and freeing.

I want the light to tell me step 14 but it only gives me steps 1 and 2.

The light of Christ asks me to trust in a way that I don't have a lot of practice doing. But every time I take the small step of faith and notice the light of Christ carrying me along, the next steps somehow get a little easier.

The light gives us new eyes.

In early December, my husband and my dad knocked down part of our dining room wall so the space would feel more open. I knew it was going to happen. He had it taped out on the wall and everything. I tried to imagine how the space might feel but I couldn't picture it. I've spent the last 18 months in this home unable to figure out how to decorate or layout this room. I could not get a mental picture or vision of what it could be.

But the second the wall came down, lots of ideas started running through my brain. "Oh I could put that over there, and this over here. And take that down and put the table here!"

It took literally removing the wall for me to start imagining the possibilities. It's the same with us. *It's as if something has to break down in us before we can see what God might want to do in and through us.*

If you want part of your life to be new this Christmas, we must name and own the truth that it's hard to envision what we can't actually see. **And that maybe a wall inside of us has to come down so the light can get through.**

This is what happens at Christmas. Jesus comes to give us a message he couldn't give from far away. His love gives us possibilities we didn't know existed. And it asks something of us. Something the deepest part of us wants to give....but we resist it too.

This light isn't just for us. Who in our world needs to know the light is for them? Because we get to show them.

Maybe it's the people of Aleppo. We can choose to stop scrolling or changing the channel on the hard stories of our world. We listen and let it break our hearts. Then we send resources and do whatever we can.

The light comes for those who are marginalized by those in power. They need some light this year. We can use whatever privilege we might have to listen deeply and speak up when it's time.

For those without homes, we make a home and say, "welcome."

For families who need clothes for their kids, we clothe them with shirts, pants, shoes and joy.

For our LGBTQ friends who have been told they need to change to be a whole people, we create a space where the actual truth is lifted up that you are not a broken person. You were created and loved by a God who sees all of who you are and we **celebrate who you are.**

And that leads us to one last observation about the light of Christ.

We need each other to figure out the light of Christ.

I want to name for a minute an interesting reality about coming to a church service on Christmas Eve. For some, this is one of the couple times a year you feel drawn to a church (maybe out of duty or obligation...or maybe out of curiosity or tradition). But however we all got here tonight, there's something about this story that seems worth celebrating.

If you're someone who hasn't been connected with a church in a while or ever, I want to tell you something tonight. This is what we do all year long. We try to figure out what it means to love people like Jesus did. Especially when people are annoying and disagree with us and push all our buttons.

We encourage each other, we listen, we laugh a lot, we light a lot of candles, pray together and share our resources to change the world around us.

So, no matter what comes this year, know that we're here. If life gets hard, send me an email, stop by. And if you find you want to be a part of a community like this during the year, then join us anytime on a Sunday morning. Because sometimes the light comes at an unexpected time. And we need each other. This following Jesus stuff isn't easy. But it's a lot more fun when we do this together.

Friends, I would love to be your pastor. And the people of this faith community would love to be your church home.

Tonight I want to end with a reading by Jan Richardson. She lost her husband three years ago and writes beautifully about pain and loss and what it looks like to begin again. The piece I'll share tonight is called, "How the Light Comes."

How the Light Comes

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.
What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.
That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

**That it loves
searching out
what is hidden,
what is lost,
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.**

That it has a fondness
for the body,
for finding its way
toward flesh,
for tracing the edges
of form,
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

**I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.**

**That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.**

**And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more**

**and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.**

—Jan Richardson
from Circle of Grace

Merry Christmas, my friends. Jesus is with us. The light is here. Amen!