

Light of Light

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. John P. Burgess
James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Based on Ephesians 5:6-20

It's been a good year for Christmas lights in our neighborhood. Night comes, and we have a feast of lights: white lights, multi-colored lights, strung over trees, framing porches; softly glowing electric candles on windowsills; and radiant stars on Christmas trees and big, bright Santas. Light has always fascinated human beings in these darkest days of the year.

God is light, says the Gospel of John, and that light has come into the world, and the darkness has not overcome it. We love the light—or do we? Light can also be blazing and blinding. Scrooge sees light streaming from the head of the Ghost of Christmas Present, until he can't stand it no more. He slams a cap on top of it and drowns it out.

For twelve days, Christians celebrate the light of Christ—from Christmas to Epiphany. As Christmas ends, will we live in the light, or will we put it out? The gospel tells us that we couldn't put it out, even if we wanted to. It is in us and around us; it is who we are. "You are the light of the world," declares Jesus. Me? You? Light? What can that mean? Is there anything to the metaphor, so to speak?

We modern people do not know just how amazing light must have been to ancient peoples. We live in an era of street lights, car lights, store lights, strobe lights, flashing lights, beaming lights, and spot lights—never-ending, artificial light. I was picking up my daughter at the airport late one November night. As we drove home at 1 a.m., a steady stream of car lights met us and accompanied us. I exclaimed, "I can't believe all the cars still out on the Parkway!" Of course, I had to wonder what we were doing out there too.

I wonder what it was like in ancient days when it really got dark at night, when you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face. Several years ago, we took a family vacation to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Iron ore for Pittsburgh's steel mills came from that area, and one of the old mines has been turned into a tourist attraction. You can actually ride a mining cart down a deep shaft to a cavern half a mile below the surface of the earth. There you gather around the tour guide, and he tells you that he is going to turn the lights out for a moment. Suddenly it is dark, I mean dark. You can see absolutely nothing, not even when your eyes adjust. That's my idea of hell—not fire and brimstone, but when your eyes are wide open and you can see nothing.

In the old days, when thick clouds covered the sky at night, people must have often had that experience. No wonder people went to bed at 8 p.m. in the wintertime. You can't do anything if you can't see. Jesus talks about people who curse the darkness, and you can understand why, if you have ever fumbled to find a key in the dark. How precious was a candle that could help you find your way to bed. How incredible it was when the sun rose in the morning, and like the first day of creation there was light.

Humans have always been drawn to light because light helps us see where we are and where we are headed. So, it is no wonder that early Christians called Jesus the light of the world. He is more than just pretty lights on the Christmas tree; he is more like the sun that takes away the darkness of life. He is

radiant; he is glorious. As Charles Wesley declared in one of his hymns, "Christ, whose glory fills the skies, Christ, the true, the only light, Sun of Righteousness, arise, Triumph o'er the shades of night; Dayspring from on high, be near; Day-star, in my heart appear."

Because early Christians associated Jesus with light, they celebrated his birth just after the winter solstice, as the days slowly start to become longer again. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." The Nicene Creed calls him, "God of God, Light of Light." Or look sometime at paintings from the Middle Ages and how they depict the birth of Christ. Jesus lies on the ground or in the manger, just after his birth. Light shines from heaven upon him, and he in turn radiates that light into the world.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. For most of us, Epiphany is just a blip on the charts, but in the early church Epiphany was even more important than Christmas. Epiphany was the celebration of God's revelation of Christ to the world. The point was not the birth of Jesus, but rather the manifestation of Jesus to the world. Epiphany declares that Christ has come; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Our Scripture passage this morning tells us just what happens when the light comes into the world. Yes, this light shows us where we are. Yes, this light shows us where we are headed. But this light does something even more—something both wonderful and frightening. The light of Jesus Christ shows us who we really are.

That is wonderful news, because when we see who we really are, we see that we are light, just as Jesus is light. God has created us, Jesus has redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit has anointed us to see God's glory in all things and to shine with God's glory. To be human—to be truly human—is to live with a sense of God's good light: to take wonder at the beauty of fields and forests, rocks, hills, and streams; to live at peace, knowing that God is working out all things for good, that God can bring good out of any evil that we humans perpetrate; and, for Paul in Ephesians, to live with a sense of God's goodness is especially—especially—to give thanks, thanks that there is a God who gives us life and will preserve us in this world and the next.

But to live in the light of Jesus Christ is also frightening news, because when we see who we really are, we have to see sides of ourselves that we would rather not see. Now, I don't just mean little misdeeds that we don't want anyone else to know about; and I don't just mean bad habits that we would rather hide from others. The Christian faith is not about embarrassing ourselves in front of other people. What the light of Jesus Christ forces us to see is that despite God's goodness, but we would rather live without God.

A lot of people today just don't see a need for God. Perhaps they turn to God when they get sick or into trouble, but what most of us really want can be boiled down to two things: 1) We want a good standard of living, and 2) we want our rights. Just think of how much of our time we spend worrying about those two things: how to have a comfortable life, and how to have others respect our rights. Most of what I read in the newspapers or on the Internet revolves around those two themes: material comfort and my right to do or be whatever I want to do or be.

Material comfort and human rights are good things, precious things. A lot of people don't have them and need them. But like all good and precious things, material comfort and human rights easily become our gods. When that happens, we settle for entertainment, instead of wonder; we settle for politics, instead of God's providence; and we settle for getting what we want, instead of giving thanks to God.

The light of Jesus Christ is wondrous and frightening. What Paul makes clear is that for Christians it is unavoidable. If you read the Bible, if you come to worship, if you receive the Lord's Supper—the light of Christ is going to shine on you and show you who you really are. You are now children of light; so be light. Don't run from God; don't forget God; and don't settle for being less than who you really are.

Paul tells us to do four things—o.k., it's not ten top things, but maybe four is enough, four ways of living in the light of Jesus Christ in 2014:

- 1) Paul says, Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Look for what is good and true and right. That's not easy; that's why we pray. Let's recommit ourselves to asking in every situation, Thy will be done.
- 2) Paul says, now that you are light, avoid the darkness. Don't go back to your old way of life. Don't hang out with people who will take you where you don't need to go. Let's recommit ourselves to reading the Bible and coming to church and receiving the Lord's Supper.
- 3) Paul says, expose the works of darkness. I said earlier that Christ did not come into the world to embarrass us, and he does not ask us to embarrass others. Christians are at their worst when they go prying into other people's lives. We are at our best when we repent—when we confess our sins and bring them into the light of Christ.
- 4) Paul says, make melody to the Lord with all your heart, and give thanks. Give thanks that God created you; give thanks that God has brought you to the church; and give thanks that God will never give up on you, not now, not ever.

Did you get that list? 1) Pray for what is pleasing to the Lord, 2) don't go back to a life without Word and sacrament, 3) confess your sins, and 4) rejoice, and give thanks for God has created you and is guiding your life.

The Christmas lights are coming down, but not even Scrooge could extinguish the light of Christ. Epiphany is just the beginning of things. You are children of light; now, go live in the light.