

Merry Christmas! This morning we came into the light as we left our homes today, and it felt so good! But a more brilliant light than even the sun can cast has come upon us! Indeed, this day we celebrate the birth of the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, the Light of the World. Alleluia! This morning we're going to talk about what this means for our day to day walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JOHN 1:1-5, 10-18

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.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

St. Paul wrote, **2 Corinthians 4:6, "God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."** This light, this face: This is God's revelation of his love for us, his presence among us, his ministry to us: the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ.

But, alas, there is darkness all around us. It's like a cancer; it comes upon us with stealth with the intent to kill. In the darkness anarchy reigns, identities are masked in shadow, and violence is buried under the canopy of secrecy. Bad things happen in the dark.

The darkness of which I speak is spiritual darkness, a darkness which is not about what our eyes can and cannot see, but a darkness which is about what lies in here (in our hearts).

When I was a teenager, I met a man who had an irritating way of not so subtly pointing out flaws in one's character. One time he said to me that I didn't know as much about myself as I thought I did. And to add insult to injury he said that I would probably never change.

I told him that he was wrong, that I understood myself pretty well, that I was on top of things in my own little corner of the world. And besides, who was he to tell me that I would never change if I wanted to?

But then he said something that blew me apart. He said, "Richard, there are things about you that you can never change. The reason you can never change them is because you can't see them, and the reason you can't see them is because you're using them to see."

He was right: If we use the darkness to see, we cannot change.

But in the Gospel, we read, **John 1:4-5, "In (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** There is hope.

I want to use a popular sports icon to illustrate what this means: Michael Jordan. There's no argument he was the best basketball player of all time. Some even say he changed how the game was played. But Michael never talked about himself like this. Rather, he just played ball and the world learned. Now everything on the court is measured against Michael's game. Players urge one another on with the words, "Be like Mike!" In a word, Michael Jordan shined light on the game of basketball and changed it forever.

That's how Jesus brought light into the world: He lived his life among us.

Now everything in life is measured against Jesus' game, his light. Indeed, many people, including unbelievers and people of other faith-traditions from around the world, use Jesus as a barometer for how to live. For example, Jesus said "**Blessed are the merciful,**" thus mercy is a universal virtue. I can't count the number of times I've heard some part of the Beatitudes or the Golden Rule quoted in the secular media.

But that's just the start of it. The Scriptures read, **John 1:10-11, "(Jesus) was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."**

Jesus was rejected by his own Creation. We like his moral ethic, sure, but we don't like his condemnation of our hypocrisy! He reaches into the darkness of our hearts with the light of his life and we cry, "Foul! Not fair! We like what you say and what you do, Jesus, but don't expect us to live like YOU! That's too much!"

In truth, we usually want to examine our lives against the backdrop of our culture, the world, the darkness. That's our comfort zone. We evaluate ourselves against what everyone else is doing. In my own eyes and in the eyes of the world I'm doing just fine, thank you very much.

But we read, **John 1:12-13, "to all who did receive (Jesus), who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."**

The life of Christ shines light on our hypocrisy, on our sins. In him we see things as they truly are. No more hiding. No more lies. In this light we feel sorrow, and we ask for and receive the Lord's forgiveness. And so the light which once nearly blinded us as we hid in our hovel amid the wreckage of our lives is the same light that brings forth our life!

The Prophet Isaiah wrote, **Isaiah 9:2, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined."**

And Jesus said of himself, **John 8:12**, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Jesus' most brilliant light shone from the Cross. From there death and darkness were defanged. If you were afraid of the dark as a child, and you found comfort when you crawled into bed with mom and dad, maybe you can relate to how Jesus has enveloped you under the covers of his grace and love: He holds you so close, providing you with protection and comfort. Indeed, he has dissolved the shadows in his light, removed all fear, and given you courage to live day-by-day in his presence. That's the power of Christ's light in your life, brothers and sisters.

We read, **John 1:14**, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Jesus is God's grace in the flesh. There's nothing to be earned but everything to be received with thankfulness. This is God's light, light pouring forth from an altar, a manger in the little town of Bethlehem. Everything is revealed, but too everything is forgiven.

So the wreckage of my life is revealed by the light of the life of Christ. But instead of measuring myself against the darkness, I measure myself against the grace and mercy of my Lord Jesus. In this light there is nothing but more light to receive; no room whatsoever for the darkness anymore. And I am so thankful.

St. Paul explained what living in this light looks like when he wrote to the church in Rome:

Romans 13:12-14

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Earlier, I talked about how the world, even the unbelieving world admires Christ's life and teaching. He has shone in the darkness and "**the darkness has not overcome it,**" despite itself. So too we shine as lights in the world.

For example, India is a country which is 80% Hindu, 14% Muslim, and less than 3% Christian. Yet it was Christian missionaries who first ministered to the poor in India, building orphanages, schools, and hospitals for the outcast. This began 300 years before anyone else started paying attention.

Christians can and do change how the game is played in this crazy world. This is our call, our ministry, our mission, to be lights amidst the darkness, lights reflecting the light of our Lord Jesus.

This day, brothers and sisters, God's light has shown down upon us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us walk in this light with one another, putting on the Lord Jesus, being like "little christs"—as Luther said—one to another, enlightening ourselves with his Word, and walking with him in faith and prayer.

Friends in Christ, may you find peace in the life of Christ. He is the light of your world.

May we walk with one another with our eyes forever on the face of Jesus. For it is in him our lives become whole.

And this week may you have an opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of the Lord. Amen.