

**The light in the darkness**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday after Christmas, December 28, 2014.

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

*John 1:5*

When I was a college student in the foothills of the Great Smokey Mountains in East Tennessee, we explored huge underground caves on Sunday afternoons. We climbed over endless rocks and crevices and submerged in underground pools of water to emerge further into the depths of the cavern. When I think about it now, I wonder how I ever went into those places. While we had better sense than to explore those caves alone, I had no fear as long as each of us was equipped with a flashlight and stayed together and looked out for each other. Our flashlights projected our shadows on the walls of the cave that appeared as distorted images of those of us who were climbing about in the darkness. We couldn't tell whose shadow was whose because they were only reflections of real people. As we wandered further into those seemingly endless dark, dank caverns we left markers to help us find our way back to the entrance. When we finally emerged into the light of day after spending hours in the cave, it was for me an experience of rising from the depths of a dark, lifeless tomb into the glorious light of resurrection.

John's gospel doesn't mention Christ's birth at Bethlehem with the familiar figures of Joseph and Mary in the stable with their newborn child in a manger surrounded by shepherds and the wise men. Instead, John simply uses the imagery of the light coming into the darkness. John testifies, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The Greek for word is *logos* from which we get terms such as monologue, dialogue and catalogue. In this case, *Logos* describes the mind of God that took human form and lived among us in the person and life of Jesus Christ. In Greek philosophy, *logos* was the principle that defined the world and gave it character. For us as Christians, Christ is our link with our Creator and defines our place in the Creation.

John opens his gospel narrative the same as the book of Genesis: "In the beginning." All things came into being with the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness. To walk in the light is to walk in the way of God. It validates that what God created is good. It gives meaning to being saved from all that is evil and wrong and untrue. There were those who did not accept that Christ was the *Logos* of God who brought the new light of understanding. Those who did receive him were given power to be children of God who are born not of human will, but of God. That God became one of us that we might become more like God is the fullest expression of grace.

The law was given through Moses while grace comes to us through Christ Jesus. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin and fear. We are free to be the people God means for us to be. The Good News is that we are no longer destined to walk in darkness. We have been ignited by the Spirit of God to be people of light. When we become absorbed in the busyness of our own worlds, we lose focus of those around us who become mere vague images. We have to stop and refocus to see those we know and love in this earthly pilgrimage who are a valuable part of our lives.

Someone once told me that she thought Christmas was a sad time. When I asked why, she said that it was because Jesus the newborn child was destined to die. I had never thought of it that way and I still don't. It is true that Jesus was born to live and die for us, but I am not sad about that. It is for me the greatest example of sacrificial love that gives of itself. Selfish love seeks its own; unselfish love seeks the good of others.

The emphasis in this season is to celebrate Christ's birth. Now is our time to emphasize the image of Mary nurturing her newborn child. Next spring during the Lenten season we will emphasize Christ's suffering and death with the image of Mary holding the slumped body of her son. Both are real and necessary images of the sacred story of our salvation because without the cross there can be no crown. The story that begins with the birth of Jesus does not end with his death. It continues with his rising above the pain inflicted on him to his triumph over the forces of evil and death. His victory makes possible our victory over all the evil and violence the world.

The imagery of light and darkness is so much a part of our faith. It helps with our understanding of our worldview. Where darkness represents ignorance, fear, hatred, sin and death, the light of Christ provides understanding, trust, love, goodness and life. The image of darkness is just as necessary as the light. How else would we know the light were it not for the darkness? Some of the most important lessons we learn in life are those dark times when we fall flat on our face and get back up and walk into the greater light of understanding what we have learned from our mistakes.

When we stop and think about it, seeds grow in the darkness of the ground; we grew in the darkness of our mother's womb and Christ rose from the darkness of the tomb to the light of the resurrection. Out of the darkness of the world in which there is so much violence and hatred comes the light of knowing that as a people of compassion we are stronger than any force of evil in the world.

God still knows how to make the morning out of the night. In the midst of our doubts and fears, the dark places of our lives are transformed by the brightness of the light of Christ.