

*Good News: The Light Shines in the Darkness*

John 1:1-14

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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Merry Christmas!

After four full weeks of Advent, Christmas is here at last. I hope that it finds you full of faith, hope and love. For many of us, I know that Advent was also full of coughs, sniffles and colds that seemed not to go away. After a bright beginning, for me Advent turned into playing virus ping-pong with our son Isaac, who missed almost two weeks of school.

But no matter, because there is Good News for us to celebrate today. We may be sick, we may be weary, we may have overcommitted once again and had a miserable time juggling our holiday schedules: it's still okay. In the end, the Good News of Christmas isn't about what we manage to do or how; it is about what *God* has done. The Good News of Christmas isn't that we managed to deliver or send all our packages and cards to others; the Good News of Christmas is that in Jesus, God sent *us* his one and only Son.

Saint John has a memorable way of expressing why Jesus' coming is Good News. *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

John mirrors the opening of his Gospel with the beginning of the Bible in Genesis. There, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* John goes back before creation. *In the beginning was the Word,* John says, meaning Jesus! *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

Wow. You know, some time next year Tom Hanks is coming out with the movie version of *The DaVinci Code*. And I expect that when it does, the media will try to be as controversial as it can. You might hear once again *The DaVinci Code* claim that the church *invented* the divinity of Jesus in the fourth century (at the Council of Nicea). I'm here to tell you that if you should catch any of this nonsense, don't pay any attention to it. It's baloney. The divinity of Jesus is embedded in the New Testament itself, such as in our Scripture reading today (as well as in many other places, like Philipians and Colossians and Hebrews).

*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.* John as well as Saint Paul attribute to Jesus the role of Creator.

This revelation brings together two important motifs in the Old Testament—that of the word of the LORD, and that of Wisdom. In the Old Testament, the word of the LORD that comes to prophets is not just a vision, or information. The word of the LORD has power to bring things about. It is not just “words,” but action and judgment. When God creates, he does so by simply speaking a *word*. *Let there be light. And there was light.* That Creative Word, John declares, was Jesus.

In the Book of Proverbs, we are introduced to Wisdom personified. Wisdom speaks like a teacher warning young people not to follow the ways of folly, but to live with Wisdom. We are told that Wisdom played a role in creation. In Jesus, the word of the Lord becomes *flesh and dwells among* people to teach the way of wisdom and to give life—not physical life, but spiritual life—life as children of God, life eternal.

*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

The Good News of Christmas is always about God’s light of life and love breaking into the dark confines of our struggling world and planting seeds of the kingdom everywhere, even where we in our doubt may never expect anything to grow. Like in C.S. Lewis’ Narnia tales, we may dwell in a cold and deathly “winter without Christmas” when we dwell in the land of our own fear and folly, but nothing can keep out Aslan. And once Aslan the Lion, the true king of Narnia, returns, winter’s snow and ice give way to spring thaw and new life springing out everywhere.

*The light shines in the darkness.* It doesn’t mean that there is no darkness. Only that the darkness has been broken. The light has come. And the light will one day increase to everlasting day. Until then, as dark as the world, or as dark as our life may become, somewhere the light will yet shine (in the darkness).

Did you know that right now, way up north in the Arctic region of the world, people have only three or four hours of sunlight each day? Of course, on the opposite side of the world, in the Antarctic, right now the penguins are getting less than four hours of *darkness*. Not only that, but in the Antarctic, the quality of light that is shining is a photographer’s dream. The warm glow of sunrise and sunset that last only a few minutes in most places drags on for *hours* in the Antarctic at this time of year.

I’ve been made aware of this because I’ve been following the adventures of a group of adventuresome photographers this month. Nearly 50 people signed up for an Antarctic photo expedition that left Argentina on Dec. 1 on a converted Russian spy trawler. After 10 days cruising around icebergs and visiting the remotest continent on our planet, they returned through the stormy Drake Passage. And just in the last week or so a couple of them have posted reports on the Web with lots of beautiful photographs.

It seems to me that we live our lives somewhere between two extremes of light and dark. Sometimes, our lives seem mostly light—and even incredibly lit by a beauty from another world. But at other times, we can feel like most everything is dark, and we despair of ever seeing things turn around again. Most of the time, for most of us, the ratio of light and dark in our lives is less dramatic.

The Good News of Christmas is that the light of God's life for us has come, has entered our world, and will not be overcome or defeated or extinguished. We may all face times in our lives when we walk through the valley of the shadow, but we need not walk alone. And no matter what the earthly outcome may be, the valley of the shadow of death is not the final stop for us. It isn't because our Lord of Life has conquered death; and that is our Easter story.

The Good News of Christmas is that even in the darkest hours, the light still shines. And we shouldn't be surprised to find that when things appear darkest, the light also shines brightest. That's the way it works in astronomy. That's the way it often works in life.

Consider, for example, the Holocaust. The Nazi genocide of an estimated six million Jews in the 1940s is one of the darkest chapters of modern history. At first glance, there is no light discernable in such a horrific story. But look more closely, and you can see inspiring acts of defiance that kept the light of goodness shining.

The occupied people of Denmark conspired to hide and rescue the estimated 7,500 Jews in that country when the Nazis moved to deport them to death camps. When Hitler gave the order to round up the Jews of Denmark in September 1943, Danish citizens from all walks of life reacted and orchestrated a campaign to defy and defeat the Nazi death plan.

"From all strata of Danish society and all parts of the country, clergymen, civil servants, doctors, store owners, farmers, fishermen and teachers protected the Jews." The Lutheran Church openly challenged the Nazis. Christian churches harbored Torah scrolls. A hospital became the secret departure point to Sweden. Financial support for this underground railroad poured in from around the country. As a result of this national movement, 99 percent of Denmark's Jews survived the war.

The people of a little French village called Le Chambon sur Lignon did on a smaller scale exactly what the people of Denmark did. Even though Nazi soldiers used their town as a place for R & R, the simple and ordinary people of this village hid and housed hundreds of Jewish refugees under the noses of the enemy.

And for people of Japanese descent, it is the story of Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara that shines with particular brightness against the black

backdrop of the Holocaust. A convert to Christianity in his adulthood via the Russian Orthodox Church, Sugihara was the lone Japanese consul in an obscure Lithuanian city in the summer of 1940. Thousands of Polish Jews were fleeing from the German occupation. One morning Consul Sugihara woke to a startling sight: more than a hundred people massed in front of his consulate. They were refugees, with nowhere else to turn.

In the days and weeks ahead, Chiune Sugihara chose to let the light shine through his role as a vice consul for the Empire of Japan. He signed more than 2,000 visas enabling as many people as possible to escape the Nazis. (In comparison, Oscar Schindler's List consisted of approximately 1,200 names.) Sugihara went all out to save people even when his superiors instructed him not to issue the visas. He risked everything and eventually, after the war and his return to Japan, he suffered the consequences of his independent action. He was forced to resign from the Japanese diplomatic corps. But neither he nor his wife nor their children regretted his act of defiance. Eventually, even the people of Japan recognized the light of his life and actions.

In all these stories, it was the light of Christian faith that guided and enabled those who chose to act righteously. Without this faith, how much darker would even this great darkness have been. How much like winter without Christmas!

The Good News of Christmas means that *The light shines in the darkness...even when it is darkest*. The light doesn't necessarily make the darkness go away. But neither does the darkness overcome the light. In fact, for my faith, it is necessary that the Good News be seen with the darkness in view, because unless the Good News takes into account the reality of our world in all its darkness, it cannot be Good News to me. If the Good News of Jesus Christ is only a story we'd all like to believe is true, but is not really true, we are, as Saint Paul said, the most miserable of people.

This Christmas marks the one-year anniversary of the horrific tsunamis in Asia. In the past year we've seen the Gulf Coast hurricanes, a devastating earthquake in Pakistan and famine (again) in Africa. That's only for starters. If the Gospel did not take the darkness of the world seriously, in all honesty I don't think I could take the Gospel seriously. But the Good News is that the Gospel affirms the darkness of our life, it doesn't end with it. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not (and will not) overcome it*.

And sometimes, even, the light shines more brightly when it is darkest. Sometimes, out of situations of personal darkness, the light of God's life finds entry into the world and pushes back the darkness in undreamed of ways.

This month the world is being introduced to C.S. Lewis' land of Narnia, home of Aslan the Lion, who is the Christ figure in this series of children's stories.

Just as New Line Cinema introduced the world to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* a few years ago, now Disney is releasing a state-of-the-art movie version of the first of the Narnia stories.

The cover story of this month's *Christianity Today* is "C.S. Lewis Superstar." But the story that is told may surprise you. During the years when this Oxford professor and convert to Christianity first gave birth to Aslan and Narnia, he was struggling with an extremely difficult personal situation at home. A bachelor, Lewis lived with his brother and an elderly woman (who used to be their housekeeper). Both were dependent on Lewis. The woman, in these years, was an invalid.

The stress of caring for two people while also bearing the load of Oxford professor, as well as playing significant roles in the Church of England, wore C.S. Lewis down. Just when Time magazine was about to put him on the front cover, Lewis *collapsed at his home and had to be taken to the hospital. He was diagnosed with strep throat, but his deeper complaint was simply exhaustion.* (CT, Dec. 2005, pp. 36-38.)

If you read *The Chronicles of Narnia* or go see the new movie that is just out, I bet you'd never imagine that this story came from C. S. Lewis when his life was in a very dark and difficult place. How does it happen? The only word we have for it, I believe, is grace. Amazing grace. Which, when you think about it, is just another way of saying that *the light shines in the darkness.*

That's the Good News of Christmas. May it be our source of hope, peace, love and joy throughout the New Year.