

NATIVITY OF OUR LORD: CHRISTMAS DAY | DECEMBER 25, 2022

ISAIAH 52:7-10 | PSALM 98 | HEBREWS 1:1-4 | JOHN 1:1-14

One of the first images that Christians used to explain who Jesus was and what he did was light. In the prologue of his gospel, St. John writes that what has come into being “in [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” A couple of centuries later, the writers of the Nicene Creed borrowed John’s image when they wrote that Jesus is “God from God, light from light.”

It's easy to understand why the early church grabbed hold of that language. Light illuminates. It gives us perspective. It gives us our orientation. If you've ever been stuck in the basement when the power goes out, you know that light can keep you from becoming afraid. Or at the very least from stubbing your toes.

But another important reason the first believers liked the image of light is because light isn't divided or diminished when it's shared. At our lessons and carols service last night, for example, we ended the service with a candlelight hymn. Everyone has a candle, and I pass the light to someone next to me who passes it to someone next to them, so on and so forth until everyone's candle is lit. So now instead of one lit candle, we have dozens. And how does my candle look when we get to the end? It looks the same.

But if I were to hand out a basket full of coins and pass it around, it would presumably have less when it came back to me. Same with other intangibles like status and power. When we share them with others, they diminish. But when light is given or communicated to others, it isn't lessened. If anything, it grows.

Those earliest believers were able to use that light image in two important ways. First, as you heard in today's gospel, they used it to describe the relationship between Jesus and God the Father. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The image John gives us here is not God delegating some decision-making power to an assistant. God the Father has 80% of the power, and Jesus has 20%. But the fullness of God's creativity and life poured out in the Word made flesh. Light from light. So what we encounter in the life of Christ is not part of God's character or one attribute of God or some selection of God's being, but the entirety of God's love and grace. That light of Christ shines in the dark, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Even the darkness of his tomb can't overcome it, because it is always in perfect communion with God the Father.

The second way the first Christians used that image was to describe our relationship with Jesus. St. John tells us, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” When we hear the word “enlighten,” we tend to think of learning something. If someone asks you if you know something, you might say, “I don't. Why don't you enlighten me.” But what St. John is talking about here isn't just knowledge. It's being brought into the light. The King James version translates it as “the true Light, which lighteth every man.” Enlightenment isn't about knowledge. It means being brought into the relationship that Jesus has with God the Father. So when St. John says that Jesus is the light of the world, he doesn't just mean he perfectly reflects God's character and love. He means that Jesus is the

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light of the world for us. That Jesus is always inviting us to share in his relationship with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And when you put those two applications together, you get a really powerful vision of how we live with God and our neighbors. Because Jesus's relationship with God the Father can't be diminished by anything, not even by death, our participation in the divine life isn't diminished by how many other people share in it. It isn't as if someone else being brought into the light lessens your own share. But just as our light was undiminished when we passed the flame last night, our relationships with God are only strengthened and enriched by the lives of others. God enlightens us not so that we can hoard the light or keep it to ourselves or put it under a bushel, but so that we can invite others into that same light. Jesus is light from light and light *for* light.

There are so many parts of our life where this isn't true. There are so many parts of our life where we do fear that there is only a limited amount to go around. We fear that someone is going to take my spot or my position or my relationship. That life is simply a zero-sum game. If someone else is getting more, we tell ourselves, then we must be getting less. And if that's true, then life is all about minimizing division and managing decline.

And yet, St. John tells us that the order of creation is not division or decline but undivided and undiminished love. And the goal of creation is not the consolidation of power or resources. But the enlightenment of all. That sharing of the uncreated and unending divine life that upholds our lives and brings them towards God's promised future.

And where else do we encounter that kind of undivided and undiminished love? We encounter it when we gather at Christ's meal every week. When we receive communion we receive the presence of Christ. And that presence is always undivided and undiminished. So when somebody else shows up next to me at communion, it isn't as if I receive less of Christ's presence. No, John tells us. Jesus is not a pie that we cut into smaller and smaller pieces. Jesus is the light that only grows brighter when we share it with others.

That is the love God gives to us this morning. And that is the love God sends us to share with all of God's beloved creation. Light undivided. Light undiminished. Light eternal.

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