

Light, Shining in Us

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and the life was the light all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. What John is trying to say is that all the light, all the power, all the goodness of God, somehow squeezed through Mary's womb into flesh. Became a helpless baby in a manger, dependent for life itself on his mother's milk, and that in this way joy, and life, and light and hope came into the world, like a light shining in darkness; and that the darkness has not, cannot, will not overcome it. That is what the good news is about. That is what being an officer is about, that is what being a Christian is about, that is what we celebrate when we gather around the table. God's light accessible to us because God became one of us, became flesh. We can't see God, so if we want to know what God is like we look at Jesus.

There is a hymn, a favorite hymn of the very early Christian Church. Paul quotes it in his letter to the Philippians. That hymn tells us that God has given to Jesus a name that is above every other name. Now why would God do that? Because Jesus, through whom all things were made, who was with God and was God gave up all that power and became one of us. Because of this act of self emptying love, God has given him the highest name, name above names.

The hymn goes on to say that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now what is it that can bring ever being human and angelic to its knees?

Sometimes brute force can bring people to their knees. People like Idi Amin torture people until they bow. They use force to threaten. They bribe, coerce and control. Before them, with few exceptions, every knee bows. That is darkness, not light. That is wicked, terrible, awful darkness!

Sometimes people, greedy for power and position, will bow in order to be empowered. People will curry favor with a Hitler, or a Saddam Hussein because such leaders have it in their power to give fortunes and position and the means to satisfy every delight of the flesh. Some people want power so much that they will crawl over others, deceive, cheat trample down, and before rulers who have cruel power, their knees bow. That is darkness, not light.

There is something other than raw power that can bring people to their knees. A person may see the Grand Canyon for the first time, of a sunset, or the wing of a butterfly on a sunny day and their breath will be taken away and the knees of their hearts will bow, compelled not by force but by beauty.

In Christ the grace and beauty and love of God shine into hurting and dark hearts and make them sing, and knees bow. That's light. "We have seen his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth."

There is darkness in our world. Hatred, resentment, pride, envy, greed, malice, dishonesty, coercion, manipulation, oppression, torture, killing.

God's presence brings light. In Jesus God has become flesh. In him was life and the life was the light of men. Light in a dark world – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self control. Do you want to see what God

looks like, look at Christ. Healing a leper, giving sight to the blind, comforting a grieving widow, flashing forth in anger against injustice and oppression.

We who name the name of Christ are called to be light shining in the world. As officers ordained and installed, our mission is to be light in the world. The light of the world has come into our lives because God has become one of us, walks among us, shares our hurts and joys. Our mission as Christians and as officers is to be light to others. Christ walks with us. We are to walk with those who are hurting, those who are angry, those who are apathetic, those who are grieving, those who are joyful. As Christ became one of us, we are to be God's love incarnate for others, bringing our ears, our hearts, our compassion, our hope, our love.

But someone will object, "I'm not light! I have serious problems in my life, with temper, with weight, with criticism, with a number of things that I am not willing to admit! If you are looking for light, you are looking in the wrong place!"

One of the things that Carolyn and I loved to do when we lived in Northern Michigan was to drive down a sand road that ran next to the Jordan River. There, in the summertime, butterflies would land by the score around puddles of water. They would open up their wings to the sun. In those shining, iridescent wings of a butterfly was a beauty that pleases the eye and delights the heart—on a summer day, on a sandy road in the woods. But the beauty is not really in the wing. The beauty is in the light bouncing off the wing. The wing just reflects the light of the sun. Turn the light off and the beauty is gone.

It is true. There is darkness in your life, and in mine. But, we are not the light. Christ Jesus is the light. That light shines in us when we make a place for it in our lives. "To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God."

Our service of ordination reminds us that we share a common ministry. What is that ministry? Simply put, it is to be God's light in a dark world. Light, God's light, the love of Christ, shining in us, through us. That ministry is to be God's heart of compassion in this congregation and in this community and in this world where nuclear weapons threaten destruction and shrapnel can sever a limb in a minute while millions watch on CNN as if it were all just a video game! God calls us in this world to be compassion. We are the body of Christ who came to heal, forgive, encourage, set free.

A little over a year ago, tragedy struck New York City. One worker sifting through the rubble of the World Trade Center was asked what could make it worth her time. She said that the motivation for her tireless work was the hope that she could save a human life. Isn't that what motivates us? God's love saves and renews human lives. Worship brings joy into thirsty hearts. It is worth it when God's love in our midst brings hope and life to someone near? Another rescue worker was asked where did he get the strength? He said that he had nothing, that the only source of his strength was spiritual. Can we begin to understand how much power and beauty there is in the good news that God has given us in Christ.

Those ordained and installed today will be asked, "Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?" Yes, I will!

But what does it mean to serve with energy? Does it mean we are to put our noses to the grindstone and our shoulders to the wheel until pushing for all we are worth, we come away spiritually, mentally and physically exhausted, resentful that others don't jump in to share our pain? No, that's not what we pledge.

Energy is more like what happens when we have been sitting on the bench and the coach finally calls us in to play. It is like what happens when we greet old friends after not seeing them for a long time. Energy is what happens when we talk about a great joy in our lives, or share a tremendous sorrow with others who have experienced similar pain. Energy means touching in our own lives what is most compelling and precious to us in our faith, and making that beauty available to others. Christ is our light, and Christ is our energy, and we are energized by his presence in our lives and in our midst! Will you serve the people with energy? Yes!

Will you serve with intelligence and imagination? Yes, I will. But what does that mean? Can you imagine the struggle that goes on in the life of a high school senior—wondering how they will make it in the world, needing to belong, to be accepted, to be loved? Can you imagine how the grace of Christ can be for that young person a source of joy and guidance and strength to make it through all that they will face as they go into the world? God calls us to imagine worship and outreach in whole new ways. And God gives us intelligence to handle and share the word of God with common sense. To read and learn and mature and grow in our faith, so that we are not the same people ten years from now as we are today. To work together without name calling or blame throwing, sitting down together to strategize and plan and dream with the experience and wisdom that come through collective years of life in God's church. Will you serve the people with intelligence and imagination? I will!

And with love. Above all, with love. Will you serve the people with love? Yes. I will. It was when Jesus was tired that the crowds came to him. It was when he had deliberately gone across the sea to get away from them that they came seeking his grace. He was looking for rest, for a time alone. But there they were, like sheep without a shepherd. The Bible says that he had compassion on them. He taught them all afternoon long. And when it was supper time, the disciples wanted to send them away. But he said, No. Give them something to eat. They didn't think there was enough food to give or enough workers to give it. But Jesus commanded them, and they shared what they had. They didn't share what they didn't have, only the meager portion they had. Christ blessed what they shared and people were fed. Because Jesus had compassion on them, they were satisfied. And so we are called to share who we are, not who we wish we could be, not the who the person was who chaired the committee before us. We don't share who we are not, but who we are. And Christ blesses what we bring. Will you serve the people with love? Yes!

When people's hearts are grabbed by something, they commit themselves in almost impossible ways. Grabbed by cocaine, people steal, kill and die early. But that is darkness.

Grabbed by a dream (most likely by their parents' dream) people train beginning at age four and then all their lives to become skaters, gymnasts, pianists, and there is beauty in the performance that they give.

Grabbed and changed by the presence of Christ, people give themselves to God's will and beauty. That's light. The light of Christ come into people's hearts brings joy, hope and beauty; God become one of us--God our source of hope and strength. When Christ broke bread, the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized him—their light and joy. As officers being ordained and installed, and as a congregation gathered to worship and praise, God brings us grace upon grace, energizes us and calls us to a simple mission. Be light, shining in darkness. God's light shining in us.