

“The Invitation to Follow the Light”

Prayer: *O God, as we reflect on your given Word for us today, startle us once again with the truth and beauty of your love given in Bethlehem. Open our hearts this day to that transforming love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Many of you know that our oldest son and his family live in Alaska. Several years ago they moved from the city of Anchorage out to Eagle River, which puts them about a mile from the high school where Mark is a teacher. After their first winter in their new home near the end of March, we received a glorious email saying ... “We can see the sun, we can see the sun!”

It seems that the new house which has a wonderful view of a mountain through their living room window never receives direct sunlight from November through the end of March. During those winter months the sun never comes high enough to get over the mountain, so, the sun never shines into their house. They are not in darkness, but they had certainly noticed that they were missing the direct rays of sun into their lives.

December is a time of great celebration in many parts of the world whether one is Christian or non-Christian. Many of these celebrations are held in connection with the winter solstice, the longest night of the year and the official beginning of winter. People celebrate the coming of light and increased sunlight in hope that the heavenly powers will bring back the long sunny days. The midwinter celebrations are often uproarious parties meant to cheer up people knowing the days will be longer and brighter.

Is it any wonder that during the 4th Century Christians decided to fix a day in December to celebrate the birth of Jesus? No one knows exactly when Jesus was born since none of the Gospels give us dating information. Surely, Christmas is the time we celebrate not just the coming of brighter days, but the coming of a new light into the world!

The promised hope is what the Gospel of John calls: *“The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it. The real light which enlightens every one.”* This is our ***Invitation to Follow the Light of Jesus Christ!***

That’s how it begins for the gospel-writer John as well: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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 1:1-5).

To the Gospel writer John, the world of his day seems as dark as the watery void before creation. John sees his fellow-travelers on this earth as drifting aimlessly in the darkness, bobbing on the swells of self-centered existence. Then there comes “a man sent from God, whose name was John” (not the gospel-writer, but John the Baptist): *“He came as a witness to testify to the light. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”* (John 1:7a, 9).

That “true light” is Jesus Christ, whose coming you and I expect this Advent. That we expect light in these waning days of early winter is no surprise. People all over the Northern Hemisphere have celebrated a winter festival of lights. As the sun sinks lower and the days shorten, some primeval urge arises within us -- to challenge the darkness. Advent wreaths, menorahs—even the electric lights that people string up on their houses—all of these lights pierce the gloom of the winter solstice and help us welcome the lengthening days. Light is warm, comforting, life-giving. Advent is an ***Invitation for you and me to Follow the Light.***

The light of God by which the human family is nourished and directed comes to a burning focus in one, single, human life! And this light—the true light—shined then ... and continues to shine today as the light of the world! The light that comes is the light of goodness, love, and the assurance of God’s constant presence.

It is the same light that was shared by the Prophet Isaiah: “... *To bring good news to the humble, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to those in prison; to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favor and a day of the vengeance of our God; ... to comfort all who mourn, to give them garlands instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourner’s tears, a garment of splendor for the heavy heart.*” (Is. 62: 1-3)

The Invitation to Follow the Light comes in Christ and is our source for peace, truth, justice, and joy. It is the light of God’s grace flowing through us—it is the spirit of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. In the midst of the beautiful language of this story we come to the somewhat strange character of John the Baptist. John comes with the modest introduction and his only job was to witness, testify, and literally reflect the coming of the light. John was not the message, but the others were to see the message reflected in John. In all that John was, he was defining for us ***The Invitation to Follow the Light*** ... the light of Jesus Christ.

This time of the year we remember again the tale written by Charles Dickens called *A Christmas Carol*. It tells of the old miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, who in a series of dreams learns about the true Christmas spirit. Scrooge has always mistreated his impoverished but cheerful clerk, Bob Cratchit. But then through the visit of the “Ghost of Christmas Present”, Scrooge sees his life through the eyes of others and realizes that his miserly, unloved life has been a waste. A changed man after his terrifying dreams, Scrooge contributes generously to the Cratchit family Christmas dinner and is blessed by the clerk’s crippled son, Tiny Tim.

Ellen and I will be seeing the performance this week at the Peoria Threatre Works Company. That is the light of the Christmas message and ***our Invitation to Follow the Light. We Follow the Light*** ... in the laughter of a Child, in the kind eyes of many years, in the gifts of music and song, ... ***We Follow the Light*** ... in the unexpected generosity when a need is seen, in the offer of a helping hand, or in a heart-felt prayer. ***We Follow the Light*** ... in spirit that we hope lasts the entire year-long. All of us here who have seen a glimpse of the light that comes in Christ ... have a responsibility to reflect the light.

Advent is ***The Invitation to Follow the Light*** ... the light of Jesus Christ. During these days of Advent and Christmas we come near to God—we feel a special presence and power through the birth of Jesus. We get a glimpse of the light that comes in Christ. The challenge of all this is to ***Follow the Light:*** to reflect the goodness, love, and assurance of God’s presence everywhere. ***To Follow the Light*** that comes in Christ as our source for peace, truth, justice and joy.

To use Walter Brueggemann's concept of prophetic imagination ... our task during Advent is to allow the prophetic imagination of Isaiah and John to cut through the numbness of our lives. We all experience times of spiritual numbness. We have times when our spirits go dry and we are filled with doubt and even disbelief.

Then one day we run into someone who is our "John the Baptist". It is someone who shares the possibility of a new light shining in our darkness. It is someone whose gift of imagination cuts through the uncertainty. It is someone who despite all that has happened in her life is filled with hope and love. Then we are able to envision new possibilities both for our lives and for the world.

These days of Advent are festive occasions when God draws us closer through *The Invitation to Follow the Light*. But these days also offer us the challenge to re-discover the light: in our family, our friends, our church, and in the blessing of God. May that light that comes in Christ so shine on each of us this Christmas ... that we reflect God's love and presence. May we see, hear, and acknowledge *The Invitation to Follow the Light*.

All that is celebrated in the Arrowhead Mall is not wrong. No, but from this Gospel lesson we are to Invited to Follow and so much more. All the Christmas parties in the world are great fun, but there is so much more. It is all very short-lived ... and besides the credit card bills come in January. The message to us is *The Invitation to Follow the Light* ... the light of Christ, the Messiah sent by God.

Let me illustrate this by relating a visit we made to the Grand Canyon about two months ago. We entered through the east entrance off of Route 89 and coming in from Cameron. You come to the Watch Tower erected on the edge of the canyon and look at the art work. There were displayed designs in sand and stone in which the different colors of the desert itself are represented. Going out on the terrace I looked off at the canyon below and tried to discern the colors. Through the haze it was difficult, but then I looked into the mirror of polarized glass which was hung in such a position that it reflected the desert. In the mirror I saw colors reflected and the light was very real.

The birth of the baby in Bethlehem is the light that comes in Christ and is our source for peace, truth, justice, and joy. To receive the gift of God's love at Christmas requires only that we slow down and acknowledge our need. To receive the gift of the light of Christ requires that we acknowledge that in many ways we are in need. To respond to the Invitation of the Light requires that we step back from the happy activities, breathe deeply, and open our hands and hearts, and let God's love into our lives.

It is as we sing in just a moment:

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8, 19-28