

**Christmas Parade of Homes: By the Light of John**  
**Isaiah 61:1-6 and John 1:1-8, 14-18**  
**Second Sunday of Advent: December 6, 2015**  
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**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

In National Geographic magazine, Verlyn Klinkenborg has written about the importance of night and darkness for the created order. He says that “most of humanity now lives under intersecting domes of reflected light from over-lit cities and suburbs... Nearly all of nighttime Europe,” he says, “is a nebula of light, as is most of the United States and all of Japan.” He goes on to describe the way in which artificial light, at night, confuses birds and changes nesting patterns. People who have dimmed house lights at the shore to avoid confusing nesting sea turtles understand this. Klinkenborg notes that seabirds captivated by search lights on land, or by the light of gas flares on marine oil platforms, can circle and circle in the thousands until they drop. Migrating at night, birds are also apt to collide with brightly lit buildings with immature birds on their first journey suffering disproportionately. “Darkness is essential to our biological welfare,” he concludes, “as essential to our internal clock, as light itself.”<sup>1</sup>

The gospel of John begins in darkness. It is as if John understands that darkness is essential to understand the value and nature of light, particularly the Light we have come to know in Jesus. Last Sunday, on our Christmas Parade of Homes, we stopped by Mark’s house to wonder if he celebrates Christmas at all. Mark tells the story of Jesus, as the Son of God, with absolutely no mention of the baby’s birth, because Mark looks at Jesus’ whole life through the lens of Easter.

By the time we get to John’s gospel, Matthew and Luke’s stories were already circulating among the early church. We’ll stop by their houses in the coming weeks, and see how the two of them get all decked out for Christmas. John’s gospel was written later than all the others, so after a full century of thinking about the birth of Jesus, he’s like an aged professor, more subdued in his telling. He’s had time to ponder this wondrous in-breaking of God into human history, and he’s more interested in what it means, than in how it happened.

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<sup>1</sup> Verlyn Klinkenborg, “Our Vanishing Night, National Geographic Magazine, Nov. 2008, p. 108-9.

The other gospels tell a narrative about Jesus' life; John is keen to teach the theology of it – how God is revealed in Christ, and who we are in light of that revelation. John leaves much of the story telling to Matthew, Mark and Luke, while he makes our spirits soar on the wings of poetry. Indeed, it is poetry set to music. Most biblical scholars think the opening verses of John's gospel are an early hymn from his church:

*In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God....  
A light shines in the darkness  
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

You have to drive out of town to get to John's house, out into the deep woods away from the illumination from street lamps or city lights. You have to make your way through real darkness to appreciate how John has his house decked out for Christmas. Just like Mark, John has not put up a tree, nor a wreath on the door. There is no manger scene on the mantel, but he has a candle in every window. He's hung a Moravian star on the porch with its many points shining in every direction.

He wants us to notice how dark it is before we arrive, so that when we walk up the pathway to his house we will be overwhelmed with the beauty of Light. As a matter of fact, John begins telling the story of Jesus by reaching all the way to the earliest moments of creation. Anyone in John's church who heard him say, "*In the beginning...*" knew he was recalling Genesis 1 and the first day of creation when God created light, and separated the light from the darkness.

That, John says, is when Jesus first *was*, at the beginning of the beginning, because Jesus is not merely born *of* God; Jesus *is* God. Christ was present in the very beginning, back on the first day of creation when *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep*. Awareness of the darkness, according to John, is a prerequisite for seeing the Light that Jesus Christ brings, and the Light that Jesus Christ is.

It is dark out there, we all know. For one thing, we are in a seasonal rhythm as the days get shorter and the nights grow longer; and frankly, it is no coincidence that we await the Advent of Christ during the winter solstice. In the fourth century the early church set the date for Christ's Mass at this bleak time of year to emphasize the light of Christ shining in darkness.

It is also dark out there in our moment of human history, just as it was at the time of Jesus. The world is at war with itself – we see it every night on the evening news – in the violent oppression of whole populations, the raging conflict between nations and religions and races of people; too many refugees to count; rampant famine and disease; as well as more local stories that have upended our notions of where this country has come on civil rights, human welfare, and public safety. There is darkness in our streets, darkness on our college campuses, and darkness inside far too many homes.

And, then there is the internal darkness, the darkness that resides inside each of us: those deep fears and anxieties that keep us awake at night; the darkness that haunts us while we contend with the complexities and transitions of life: while we wait for a diagnosis; while we yearn for reconciliation; the darkness of profound grief, for what was and is no more, someone who was and is no more, which many of us quietly endure during the holidays.

Darkness comes in so many forms – external and internal, local and global. And that is the kind of all-pervasive darkness about which John spoke when he said that in the fullness of time, God came to us in Light so glorious that no darkness could ever extinguish it.

God sent his servant John the Baptist to point to the light that was coming, to inspire hope in the midst of human darkness, knowing that faith is a way of seeing in the dark. Faith could be compared to those night goggles the military uses to help its personnel see in the dark. It is a helpful image, I think. In a totally black room or field, you can put on those goggles and see. You can see other persons or objects or things moving, because an enhanced spectral range in the goggles picks up and concentrates unseen light.

Something in the gospel of John, something in Abraham and in John the Baptist, something even in us has been given this ability to look at the darkness we experience in our lives and in the world, and concentrate unseen light in such a way as to help us see Christ coming, and to have the faith that no darkness is deep enough to extinguish the light we see in him. A baby born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago may seem a mere flickering flame against the vast darkness we experience in our world today, but it is an inextinguishable light, with unimaginable power.

Christian Fuhrer knew the power of that light. Fuhrer was the pastor of the famed Lutheran Church of Saint Nicholas in Leipzig, East Germany. The church

was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the city was founded and it became an important seat of the Protestant Reformation. It's also where Johann Sebastian Bach premiered his St. John's Passion.

At Fuhrer's funeral last year he was celebrated as the East German dissident who led the Peaceful Revolution. Determined that the Wall that divided the East from the West was evil, and that human freedom is a theological issue every bit as much as a political one, in the 1980's Furher began prayer services for peace every Monday night. Leipzig is a University town and these prayer services were filled with young and hopeful college students. At first the gatherings were small but as word of them spread, the crowds grew to the tens of thousands.

Then in October, 1989, the Monday night prayers at the church culminated in a standoff between this peaceful resistance, and the powerful Communist Party. The pastor admonished the demonstrators to be non-violent. "Put down your rocks," he preached. They carried candles and flowers instead. When the Communist Ministry for State Security arranged to occupy more than 500 seats in the church during the Monday prayers, over seventy thousand peaceful citizens gathered in the streets. Meanwhile, heavily armed security officials and paratroopers waited for instructions from Moscow and Berlin on when they could subdue the demonstrators. The order never came.

The security chief who desperately wanted to quell the rebellion by force was later shown on film, staring out at the crowd in front of his headquarters – the crowd whose freedom march had begun in the church; the crowd who had heard the prophetic witness of a brave and impassioned pastor emerging from decades of oppression saying, "Let's move forward in peace;" the crowd so enormous that it stirred fear in the powerful chief of security – with his tanks and tear gas and firearms; and yet, in that potentially explosive moment the security chief, ready to unleash his armed guards was found saying, "We planned for everything... we were prepared for everything, everything except candles and prayer." The Berlin Wall came down less than a month later.

In an interview with the New York Times just a few years ago, Christian Fuhrer said that the faith of Christian people moves in the earthly realm. "It's not the throne and the altar, he said, "but the street and the altar that belong together."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Lutheran Pastor Christian Fuhrere, East German dissident, dies at 71," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2014.

We celebrate Advent to be reminded that the light shines in the darkness. With candles and prayer the darkness of our world is lit up with hope, because that is where God in Jesus Christ enters in.

The darkness cannot overcome it. The darkness cannot overcome it. The light shines – even now. Amen.