

“Long-awaited Illumination” Message for Jan. 3, 2010

Light.

Light is one of those elements of life that we just can't seem to live without.

Light comes from many sources – the sun, the glow of candles, electric lamps – even insects!

Light from the sun warms us up, grows our food, and fills our bodies with vitamin D which helps us form strong bones and promotes natural immunity, encourages skin growth and healing, stimulates hormone production and contributes to an overall sense of well-being.

People who live in sun-deprived areas sit under sun lamps for periods of time each day to help keep that level of well-being.

Light from candles is magical to us in modern time, and we use it to create a mood of romance, of quiet peace, of reverence.

In days past, candles or oil lamps were the only way one could have light after the sun went down, so for those folks, it was more utilitarian – but we enjoy the glow of candlelight.

On Christmas Eve, our church was filled with this glow as we sang Silent Night, and many of us were moved to tears at the beauty of that sight.

Like those of olden days who used candles and oil lamps for light to enable them to see – we've come to depend on electricity to provide us with light on demand. While it's not as romantic, electric light is generally dependable and we're frustrated when power goes out and that source isn't available.

Light reveals – light shines – light illuminates. As humans in God's world, we crave light.

But when you don't have light, you have darkness.

Darkness is cold and drafty.

Darkness freezes our souls and fosters fear.

Darkness invites misbehavior – darkness houses evil and provides a playground for evil-doers.

Darkness craves unrest and doubt...not much grows in darkness, because darkness covers everything in black.

Darkness likes to be alone – darkness wants to creep into skeptical hearts to stir up a pot of hatred and despair.

Darkness covers – darkness dulls – darkness obscures. As humans who make mistakes in God's world, we fear darkness.

People of God have walked the line between lightness and darkness for centuries, because we have both of these elements within our souls.

As imperfect beings, our lives alter between moments of shining glory and the heaviest, bleakest times of the blackest pitch.

We are real.

We rise up and we mess up.

We lean on God and we think we have all the control...and sometimes it all comes crashing down, because we aren't as great as this control stuff as we think we are.

Then, we're back in the darkness wondering what will happen next.

A cry goes out – save us, O God!

And soon, we see God at the end of the road, holding a lamp that shows us the better path.

God brings the light...again and again. Thank God!

This pattern is amazingly consistent for those who believe...beginning with Adam and Eve straight through to the people of the early church.

While there were golden times, such as when David reigned, which brought many blessings to the Children of Israel, I imagine that the Jews of the days before Jesus was born knew how it felt to live in darkness.

They had rules and procedures given to them by prophets and tablets with commandments to help them, but it seems there was so much temptation and so many ways to live that didn't match God's ways (that may have been more fun or less difficult to follow), they kept falling off the path.

It's just too easy to wander away – and if everyone else around you is doing the same thing, it becomes part of the regularity of your days.

The Children of Israel spent a fair amount of time bumping around in the darkness.

Prophets threatened them with abandonment by God or punishments so horrible they would not soon recover. The Jews were told time and again to go back to God's Way, but they seemed to have trouble with this notion.

So God, the loving parent, tried to teach steer them back into the light. Punishments were plenty and creative: swarms of locusts, strange diseases, murder of first-born sons, years of drought, wars, and reigns of terror by emotionally unstable rulers.

The Jews were slow learners, and they spent much of their time before Jesus just surviving...waiting in darkness.

No wonder they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah – “God with us” – the Light of God, spoken of by Isaiah and other prophets.

In years past they'd heard about how God was the Light, and then, the talk was about how another would come from and of God, who would be God's new Light for them, who would teach them and save them from themselves.

They lived in shadowy anticipation...waiting...hoping...wondering with the appearance of each new prophet if this was the Messiah at last.

And then one day, the Light finally arrived in the form of a baby, and as the word spread, I'm sure there was quiet celebration, though it would be many years before the Children of Israel could experience the power of this Light.

Jesus would live more than thirty years before he began his ministry – and while he would teach them many things in the time he had remaining, the true illumination of Jesus' light wouldn't be visible to anyone until after his death and resurrection.

But today, like the Jews of old, we rejoice in the power and visibility of God's love for us. Like the wise men who paid homage to the Child, and we follow the Light that guides us to a bedside full of hope, for we know we aren't much different than the Jews.

We all have walked in our own darkness, and we all need God's love and compassion – God's parental wisdom and forgiveness - that is revealed to us through the birth of this Child.

I found a section of a discussion from the UCC lectionary – I think it speaks for the power of the event of Jesus' birth in our time, our need for God's love and Light...and what should come of it as that Light finds a place to shine within us.

Jesus Christ shows us who God is, and we have received from his fullness, "grace upon grace." This phrase sets a tone for this new year, especially when we're struggling on our way out of deep economic troubles. It may be a kind of secular heresy to see plenty right now, to see abundance, to see fullness even in a time like this.

However, if we can claim that there is more than enough of everything we need most: forgiveness and reconciliation, grace, life, truth, joy, generosity, healing, justice, perhaps we can also believe that there is more than enough of what our bodies need to live on: food, water, land, clothing, and shelter.

Princeton Theological Seminary New Testament professor Beverly Gaventa reminds us that we're not the only ones blessed by the light of God, for "all people, whether they believe it or not, live in a world illuminated by the light just as they live in a world created by the Word. What they are called to do is to trust the light, to walk in it, and thereby to become children of light."

There it is...the truth, throwing light into the sky as boldly as search lights opening a new mall.

God is Light, Jesus is Light and guess what? So are we.

Not only are we to take the Light of Jesus for ourselves – to pull us out of our darkness and illuminate our own paths – but we are obligated to become beacons for others.

God gave us Jesus so that we might share God's love with the world, because so many still live in the black places of their hearts, waiting for the Light.

God's Light.

It reveals. It shines. It illuminates upon us and within us.

So, think about it.

What difference has the light shining on your life made in the life of the world?

Amen.