

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS”

5. Christ

(John 1:9-13)

Pastor John Hart

December 24, 2019

One of the great pleasures of this season is Christmas lights. It's no accident that the early church decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on the darkest day of the year – it wanted to emphasize the coming of the Light of the World into our darkness. And ever since the celebration of Jesus' birth was set on December 25, it has been lit up with Christmas lights.

There are all kinds of Christmas lights. There are special holiday lights in the malls. There are the outdoor lights with which we decorate our homes, from the understated single candle each window to the exuberant multi-colored displays of nativity scenes and Santa with his reindeer on the roof. There are even Zoo Lights! And one reason we're drawn here this evening, to this particular service, is the candlelight.

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The final Scripture reading we'll hear tonight, from the opening verses of *The Gospel of John*, also speaks about Christmas light:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, came into the world. He was in his own world, for God made the world through him, and yet the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own country, but his own people didn't accept him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in him, he gave them the right to become God's children. They didn't become God's children by natural means – they were born of God.

In this passage, John writes about the *two* events of Christmas, and we do well always to understand Christmas as two events.

The first event is a *cosmic* event, a unique historical event, and that is that God came into our world as a human being in Jesus. John calls Jesus the *true* light, and he means that, among the many lights in the world, Jesus is the *faithful* light, the *real* light, the *authentic* light. This Light, this Jesus, came into the world to enlighten us, to illumine the meaning of our existence, to show us in the light of day what life really is – genuine human life, eternal life, life as God created it to be lived. Jesus Christ was the light of the first Christmas, and he remains the light of every Christmas since, because God has never been lit up more clearly.

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That's the first Christmas event which John writes about, the coming of the true light into the world. But John also writes about a second Christmas event. And this second event is a *personal* event – how God's light was received. And what's astonishing is that the light wasn't recognized. The light wasn't acknowledged. People didn't see what was shining right in front of them. Here was the true light, the light of God Himself, the light that shines with hope and peace and love and joy – and they missed it.

How could that have happened? How is it possible that God Himself could come to live among us, live beside us, live out in flesh and blood His will and His love for us, and we miss it?

Well, perhaps we miss the light that shines in our midst because there are too many other lights distracting us. John never says that this was the jazziest light, the most dazzling light – only that it was the true light.

You see, there are always all kinds of lights around us, lights flashing in our face. Even at Christmas. Especially at Christmas. Sometimes there's just too much going on, and our senses go on overload, and it's hard to clear our heads:

- There's too much pressure to feel the hope with which God secures our lives.
- There's too much noise to hear the peace that God places in our hearts.
- There are too many parties to taste the love which God washes over us.
- There are too many crowds to smell the joy of the dawning of a brand-new world.
- And there's too much artificial light, so much reflected light at Christmas, that there's kind of a general glow, such that it's hard to see real light, authentic light, true light, just like how, in the city, it's hard to make out the stars.¹

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But seeing the light is what Christmas is all about – because the true light, Jesus Christ, is the gift of Christmas.

- Jesus Christ is the gift of Christmas because He is the best God has to offer us.
- Jesus Christ is the gift of Christmas because He is Emmanuel – God with us.
- Jesus Christ is the gift of Christmas because God's best gifts always come wrapped in flesh.

¹ Garrison Keillor, "The Wise Men", *More News from Lake Wobegon* (audiotape).

In order to receive this gift, John writes, means to believe. To believe means realizing that Jesus expresses the very heart of God's love for us. It means standing before God with openness and thankfulness and trust. It means coming to God in humility and simplicity and with a sense of adventure. Because to receive God's gift of Jesus Christ – John says it's like being born again, being born of God.

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Friends: the gift of Christmas is that the true light of God was born as a baby, in the flesh – Jesus Christ. The light of Jesus Christ is God's Christmas gift to us, a light which illuminates the very depths of our being. And the miracle of Christmas is that some people – the shepherds, the wise men, even some of us now – are looking with open hearts for *this* light among the Christmas lights, so that He may shine upon us, and in us, and through us.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, came into the world. ... And to all who received him, who believed in him, he gave them the right to become God's children – ... those who were born of God.

AMEN

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