

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

A Christmas Eve Sermon
By Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
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"The glory of the Lord shone round about them...I bring you good tidings of great joy for all the people."ⁱ "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined..."ⁱⁱ

Merry Christmas Eve to all of you. Tonight we celebrate the kindling of the light against the darkness. "For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given."ⁱⁱⁱ We celebrate the birth of Jesus, who in the New Testament was called "the light of the world"^{iv} Tonight, in this service, we will pray to "God of light;"^v we will sing of "Light from Light eternal"^{vi} and of the "Son of God, love's pure light."^{vii} We'll light candles at the end of the service until this whole church is filled with light.

As you know, with the coming of the winter solstice, darkness reigns. We've just passed the longest night of the year, and the sun is making its lowest trajectory across the sky during the day now, in the northern hemisphere. It's not entirely coincidental that many religious traditions celebrate festivals of lights at this time of the year. There's Hanukkah in the Jewish tradition, with the lighting of the candles of the menorah over an eight day period.^{viii} Many in the African American community celebrate Kwanza in late December, lighting a new candle on the kinara candleholder for seven days.^{ix} Even the Indian Festival of Lights, Divali, falls in December for Jains, although most Hindus celebrate it at the time of the new moon preceding November 14.^x In the ancient Roman world, December 25 was celebrated as the birthday of the god Mithra, who was identified with the sun and called the Sun of Righteousness.^{xi} Along with his December 25 birth date, the title "Sun of Righteousness" was subsequently transferred from Mithra to Jesus,^{xii} as you'll see in the third verse when we join in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" later in the service. In this country now, and in much of the world, Christmas tree lights abound in December, along with outdoor lights and candles in windows.

So there are natural, seasonal reasons to kindle light in the darkness at Christmas time. Yet, much more importantly, for Christians, is the conviction that Jesus brought new light into the world. As the gospel John explains, "What has come into being in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."^{xiii} Then the First Letter of John explains that not only is "God...light,"^{xiv} but also "God is love."^{xv} To follow Jesus is to love one another.^{xvi} "Beloved...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."^{xvii}

Religious scholar Huston Smith, in his chapter on Christianity in his book on The World's Religions, explains that the unique contribution of Jesus to the history of religion is precisely his new vision of love.^{xviii} He was an authentic Jew in emphasizing the commandments to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself.^{xix} But then he introduced a new understanding of what love meant:

Not just "love your neighbor," but "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." "Turn the other cheek..."^{xx} "Forgive, and you will be forgiven..."^{xxi} Jesus even loved those who horribly tortured and crucified him: As he said from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."^{xxii} He spent time with tax collectors, ate with outcasts and sinners, socialized with prostitutes, and healed on the Sabbath when compassion demanded.^{xxiii} He had a radically alternative vision of human community, which led his followers to live as equals beyond conventional barriers of race, gender, and status. Not only did outsiders remark how much early Christians loved each other, but Christians also seemed to be remarkably joyful, not to mention fearless in the face of persecution and death.^{xxiv}

This is the new light that came into the world in Jesus. This is the "good news of great joy for all the people."^{xxv} In rather ecstatic language, Huston Smith exclaims: "Melting the barriers of fear, guilt, and ego, [the love Jesus taught] poured through [members of the early Christian community] as if they were sluice gates, augmenting the love they had hitherto felt for others, until the difference in degree became a difference in kind and a new quality, which the world has come to call Christian love, was born."^{xxvi}

How can each of us catch that kind of Christmas spirit this evening? How can each of us who call ourselves Christian walk out of here filled with that kind of light against the darkness? How especially when Christians are not always seen as so loving by others? Christians have been responsible for inquisitions, witch hunts, holocausts, holy wars, and bigotry of all kinds. Christians can be smug, moralistic, judgmental, myopic, intolerant. So, I offer you a story which might point the way and be of some inspiration. No doubt a number of you have heard it before, but I believe it bears repeating. It remains illuminating, especially tonight.

Starting in the 1980's, the five state area of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana had been designated a "white homeland" by the Aryan nation and affiliated skinhead groups, Klan members, and other white supremacists. As a result, non-whites, Jews and gays in those states were targeted for harassment, vandalism and injury -- up to and including murder. Billings, Montana, with a population of about 100,000, experienced a number of hate crimes, including desecration of a Jewish cemetery, threatening phone calls to Jewish residents, and swastikas painted on the home of an inter-racial couple. Then, on December 2, 1993, a brick was thrown through the window of 5-year-old Isaac Schnitzer's bedroom. His bed was strewn with shards of glass. The reason for smashing his window was that a menorah had been stenciled on it as part of the family's Hanukkah celebration. As the Billings Gazette explained the next day, his mother was not happy with the advice she then received from the investigating police officer. He suggested that she not replace the menorah. Now, how would Tammie Schnitzer explain this to her son, she was quoted as wondering in the article.

A Christian mother in Billings read the newspaper article and immediately telephoned her minister at the First Congregational United Church of Christ. She imagined out loud with him what it would be like, by analogy, to explain to her children that they couldn't have a Christmas tree in their window or a wreath on their door because it wasn't safe. As a result, the minister got on the phone to his Christian clergy colleagues around town, and after their Sunday sermons, menorahs appeared in the windows of hundreds of Christian homes. During the week, one by one, more menorahs went up as the spirit spread. By the end of the week more than six thousand Billings homes were

decorated with menorahs. Then a sporting goods store got involved by displaying these words on its large billboard: "Not in our town! No hate. No violence. Peace on earth." The billboard was shot at. Christian townspeople organized a vigil outside the synagogue during Sabbath services. The first night they did so, bricks and bullets smashed windows at the Central Catholic high school, where an electric marquee read "Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish friends." The United Methodist Church put up a public menorah display, and its windows were shattered. Six non-Jewish homes displaying menorahs had their windows broken. The cat of another family exhibiting a menorah was shot and killed by a bow and arrow. The car windows of a Christian family with a menorah were smashed, with a note left on the car that said "Jew lover."^{xxvii}

Exactly right! Jew lover. Lover. Lover of humanity. Lover of the persecuted and the oppressed. This is what Christian love at its best is all about. Putting oneself at personal risk in solidarity with those who are targeted by hate. This is what it means to bring light into the darkness. "Light one candle" in the words of Peter Yarrow's song. "Light one candle for the Maccabee children... Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice justice and freedom demand... Light one candle to bring us together with peace as the song in our heart... Don't let the light go out, it's lasted for so many years. Don't let the light go out, let it shine through our love and our tears." That's the Jewish heritage of light, which Jesus knew as a Jew. What a fitting tribute to that heritage to have Christians at Christmas time putting up menorahs in their windows all over Billings, Montana.

And as a result, anti-Semitic incidents in Billings waned in the New Year. And more demonstrations of solidarity ensued. During the Passover holiday the following spring, 250 Christians joined their Jewish brothers and sisters in a traditional Seder meal. Although there were only several dozen Jewish families in Billings, many new friendships formed and greater mutual understanding was achieved. Hate overcome by love. Life affirmed in the face of death. A light in the darkness. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined."

Let's remember this message of radical love as we exchange gifts tomorrow and celebrate Christmas with heart and soul and voice. "For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given... And his name is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."^{xxviii} God is light. God is love. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will" toward all, now and forevermore. AMEN.

NOTES

ⁱ Luke 2: 9, 10.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 9:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 9: 6.

^{iv} E.g., Mark 5:14; John 8:12.

^v In the Prayers of the People, line 1.

^{vi} In "O Come, All Ye Faithful," verse 2.

^{vi} In "Silent Night," verse 3.

^{viii} Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 580.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 649.

^x "Ceremonial and Ritualistic Objects," Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1978), vol. 3, p. 1177.

^{xi} Carl Seaburg (ed.), Celebrating Christmas (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1983), pp. 4, 6.

^{xii} Ibid., p. 6.

^{xiii} John 1: 3-5.

^{xiv} I John 1: 5.

^{xv} I John 4: 8.

^{xvi} I John 3: 23-24.

^{xvii} I John 4: 12.

^{xviii} Huston Smith, The World's Religions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p.

^{xix} See Matthew 22: 37-39; Mark 12: 30-31; Luke 10:27.

^{xx} Matthew 5: 39.

^{xxi} Luke 6: 37.

^{xxii} Luke 23: 34.

^{xxiii} Smith, World's Religions, p. 322.

^{xxiv} Ibid., p. 332.

^{xxv} Luke 2: 10.

^{xxvi} Smith, World's Religions, p. 335.

^{xxvii} Jo Clare Hartsig and Walter Wink, "Light in Montana: How One Town Said No to Hate" Civic Participation and Community Action Sourcebook (New England Literacy Resource Center, 1995), <http://hub1.worlded.org/docs/vera/montana.htm>

^{xxviii} Isaiah 9: 6.