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Why Christmas is Still Merry: It's About Light in the Darkness!

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TEXT: John 1:1-9 (NRSV)

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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Dear friends,

As we experience shorter days and more and more darkness during this time of year, it becomes apparent how important light is to us as human beings. Darkness can really bring us down after a while. A bright day of sunshine after long, dark hours and days of overcast skies is like a precious gift that lifts our spirits and gives us a new lease on life. Living in the darkness can not only be depressing, but it can be frightening as well. And light helps. As a child, a crack of light shining through my closet door comforted me and calm my fears so that I could peacefully go to sleep each night in that dark basement bedroom. And have you ever tried driving at night without your headlights? I have. It's impossible. Where would we be without headlights on our cars helping us to

see the road and not drive off? And can you grow plants in the dark? Of course not; they need sunlight. Light gives life as well. Sunlight causes the plants to grow and gives us crops to harvest. Light is a wonderful thing. It not only illuminates, but it brings us beauty. Even in the dark, as you look at the sky and see the stars and the moon. It's an awe inspiring thing to behold. And what about a glorious sunrise or sunset that causes you to take a deep breath and say, "How beautiful!?" And light decorates the night – Christmas lights on our trees, whether inside or outside, give us some beauty in the darkness. I like to look out my patio door these days at night because it's a beautiful light display on my neighbor's trees.

So light is important in all matters of life; not only physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. The Gospel of John tells us that today: the light that gives life is coming to the world, he says. The pre-existent Christ is described poetically in the first five verses of John's gospel. He talks about the beginning, reminds us of the book of Genesis, he said, "In the beginning was the word," he's talking about Jesus there. He is the word, He was with God. And he says the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. In other words, Jesus is divine. He's the second person of the Trinity. And we're told all things were made through Him. He's the creator. And in Him was life. He's the giver of life. And the life was the light of all people. As we hear about the light, we remember Old Testament references to God as the light. In Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid?" And we turn to Isaiah 9: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Or Isaiah 60:1, to Israel: "Your light has come. The glory of the Lord shines upon you."

Well, John goes on to tell us that this light is even stronger than darkness, it's powerful. Because it's God's light. And of course, you know, if you light a candle in a dark room, it dispels the darkness. John is using the image of light and darkness in a symbolic sort of way: light is symbolic of goodness, truth and life, and darkness is symbolic of evil and falsehood and ignorance, death, chaos in the world. John then goes on to tell us about a man named John the Baptist. He said he came to bear witness to the light; to point people to that light, Jesus Christ, that we've been describing. And he says the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. The true light, he says, the real light has come; which insinuates that there are false lights like other gods or philosophies of the world that a person might choose to turn to for answers to life's big questions. Or things we depend on for security, like earthly power or wisdom. They're are nothing more than a flash in the pan in comparison to the true light – they come and

go. They can't help us. Or we turn to ourselves for light – our accomplishments, our own human intelligence. But in the end, we're still sitting in the dark. We are just not capable of taking on the darkness around us or within us.

There are two important truths for us to grasp in this passage today. The first one is this: the world is a dark place. You just have to look around and see that. Evil thinking and behavior and lies and chaos and death and violence and injustice and suffering; and we just can't seem to fix it. And we look within our own hearts, and there's a darkness there that we can't fix either, try as we may. As Amy Joseph writes, the beauty of our humanity is still evident, but ugliness abounds. We need light, a powerful light to dispel the darkness and save us from perishing.

Which gets us to the second truth: God's light entered our world, which was held captive to darkness, the darkness of sin and death. God has given us light. We read in this passage at John the Baptist's Ministry was to point people to that light, Jesus Christ; people who are living in darkness. And Jesus Himself even referred to Himself as light. In John 8, for instance, Jesus said, "As long as I'm in the world, I'm the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And John 12, He says, "I've come into the world as light, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness."

So at Christmas, as we're headed towards that, we remember that this heavenly, everlasting light, Jesus, stepped into our troubled and dark world, from which we could not save ourselves. With His goodness and grace and truth to enlighten us to the truth, He enlightens us with the truth about ourselves: our need for a savior from sin. We are perishing and cannot save ourselves, as John will say later in a New Testament letter: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." We are sinful people, hopelessly lost and separated from God. And he gives us the truth about God, this Jesus. He helps us to see the love of God, that God loves us and wants a relationship with us. Jesus has made Him known to us. His arrival into our world shows us the extent to which God will go to have a relationship with us. He stepped down into the darkness. He stepped down to rescue us from that darkness and bring us back to Himself. As the apostle Peter points out, I love this line in one of his letters in our New Testament, that the "light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring us into God's marvelous light." He says, "You're a chosen people, brought into God's marvelous light," as he wrote to those early Christians.

When you think about it, Jesus experienced a very dark night so that we could have light – God's beautiful light. Somewhere between the prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane and the mock trial, it was a dark night of the soul for Jesus. He experienced humanity's worst. He experienced great darkness thrown at Him: cruelty, beatings, humiliation, desertion, betrayal, and finally crucifixion on a cross – when the sky became dark. And he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, experiencing the worst thing of all: separation from the light of His Father. But darkness did not overcome the light. He rose into the light of Easter – victorious, conquering the darkness of death. Light wins over darkness.

And you need to ask, “Why all this bother?” Well, so that you and I could live in God's marvelous light. That's how much you are loved. Jesus went through the darkness of the passion and the cross and God's judgment because of God's deep love for us. And ultimately, Christmas is the beginning of a rescue mission; a rescue of people living in darkness without any hope of saving themselves. So as we remember the cradle of Christ at Christmas, we also remember the cross of Christ for which he came to save us.

I'm reminded of something I read a number of years ago. John McCain, Senator John McCain, told a personal story that had occurred when he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. And it touches upon this truth that we've been discussing today about the light. He writes:

When I was a prisoner of war in Vietnam, my captors would tie my arms behind my back and then loop the rope around my neck and ankles so that my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night. One night, a guard came into my cell. He put a finger to his lips, signaling for me to be quiet and then loosened my ropes to relieve my pain. The next morning, when his shift ended, the guard returned and re-tightened the ropes, never saying a word to me. A month or so later, on Christmas Day, I was standing in the dirt courtyard when I saw that same guard approached me. He walked up and stood silently next to me, not looking or smiling at me. Then he used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp.

And finally, the true light came to rescue us all; He who came to shed light on the question of what makes life for real, real life as God intended it. He says real life is about trusting Him and loving one another as He's loved us and serving others as He washed the feet of His disciples. He opens our eyes to see what's important and He shows us what makes our lives work best as we follow him. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Way to Glory*, writes, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." He shows us life.

Now, near the end of our passage for the day, we learned the sole purpose of John the Baptist and his witness about Jesus: that all might believe through John's testimony; that they might put their faith in Jesus trust and follow Him as savior and friend. I've heard faith and belief in Jesus described in this way: suppose there's a fire in the upper section of a house. As the people gather in the street below, a child is seen at the window of a room next to the fire. The fire trucks are at least five minutes away, so it'll be too late to help the boy. How is the child to escape? Now, suppose that in the neighborhood there's a large man well known for his strength and athletic ability. He arrives at the scene and shouts to the child, "Drop into my arms. Don't be afraid. I'll catch you." It's one part of faith for the child to know that the man is there. It's another part of faith to believe that the man is strong and able to catch someone. But the essence of faith lies in his dropping down into the man's arms.

And that's the appeal today. Your light has come. Come to the light. Believe in Him. Jump into the loving arms, the strong arms of Christ Jesus, for life, for new life, eternal life, and everlasting life. And it is everlasting, you know. Revelation 22:5 tells us of a bright, eternal future for those who belong to Jesus Christ. We will live in His marvelous light. Night will be no more, nor will we need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give us light. That's why we confidently prayed a prayer at Christian funerals, it goes like this:

Into your hands, oh merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive them into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

I want to end this message today with a favorite devotion of mine written by Dr. Gerhard Frost, it's a meditation on John 1:5, and I think it's great meditation for us as we

think about this whole passage today. That 5th verse of John 1 is: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." And the title of the meditation is "Grounds for Hope". If I am asked "What are my grounds for hope?", this is my answer: light is lord over darkness. Truth is lord over falsehood. Life is ever lord over death. Of all the facts I daily live with, there's none more comforting than this. If I have two rooms, one dark, the other light and I open the door between them, the dark room becomes lighter without the light one becoming darker. I know this is no headline, but it's a marvelous footnote. And God comforts me in that.

And that is why Christmas is still merry. No matter what, no matter how dark the world may appear to us, we have a light, Jesus Christ, to turn to; the true light to trust in. He never goes out, He never leaves us, but He shines into our lives, guiding us home in the darkness to our Heavenly Father. The light has won over darkness, so thanks be to God for Jesus Christ, the light of the world. He is our comfort, our joy, and our hope, even when the days are dark. And that's why Christmas is still merry.

Amen.