

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

This Little Light of Mine

Sunday, December 16, 2018

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John 1:1–9

We continue to reflect on some of our favorite Christmas songs. On the first Sunday of Advent we remembered the famous lyrics to “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”: “You better watch out, you better not cry; you better not pout, I’m telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town.” Through that song we learned that Advent is about waiting with expectancy and hope for God to show up in our lives.

Last week we reflected on Isaiah’s promise of comfort with the song, “I’ll have a blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas.” We learned that Advent means God cares about our struggles, understands our struggles, and is with us in our struggles.

Today, we remember the popular children’s song, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Now, many folks do not think of this song as a traditional Christmas song, but they are mistaken. All you have to do is read our scripture lesson for today. Christmas is all about the light of Christ shining in a dark world.

The gospel of John refers to Christ as the light of the world! In fact, the gospel of John uses the word “light” no fewer than 21 times when referring to Christ. Why do we think the star shone so brightly over Bethlehem? Light was coming into our world! This is why we decorate our Christmas trees and the outside of our houses with hundreds and hundreds of lights! This is what Christmas is all about—the light of Christ penetrating a lost and dark world. The purpose of Advent is to remind us that we don’t have to remain in darkness. This morning I want to share why and how the light of Christ overcomes our darkness.

The Light of Christ is Within You

In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. —John 1:4–5

All who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. —John 1:12–13

These verses mean that God has given us everything we need to live the abundant life because his light lives within us. His light gives us everything we need to succeed. His light gives us everything we need to live out our potential, and our potential is huge!

I remember singing about this as a kid. My sisters and I would sing the old Gaither chorus, “I am a promise. I am a possibility. I am a promise with a capitol P. I am a great big bundle of potentiality. I am learning to hear God’s voice. And I am trying to make the right choices. I am a promise to be anything that God wants me to be.”

Now, how often have we heard this, and how often have we not believed it? How often do our attitudes keep us from living our life to the fullest, to shining our light and living our days the way God created us to live them—with joy, with peace, with passion and love! How often have we missed those opportunities that God has thrown our way because we have forgotten about the light within us?

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a Native American who found an egg that had been laid by an eagle. Not being able to return the egg to an eagle’s nest, the next best thing to do was to put it in the nest of a prairie chicken. The result was predictable. The hen sat on this eagle’s egg, along with her own eggs, knowing nothing of the addition.

By and by the little eaglet was hatched alongside the prairie chickens. All his life, the changeling eagle, thinking he was a prairie chicken, did what the prairie chickens did. He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. He clucked and cackled. And he flew in a brief thrashing of wings and flurry of feathers no more than a few feet off the ground. After all, that’s how prairie chickens were supposed to fly.

Years passed. And the changeling eagle grew very old. One day, he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. Hanging with graceful majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. “What a beautiful bird!” said the eagle to his neighbor. “What is it?” “That’s an eagle, the chief of the birds,” the neighbor clucked. “But don’t give it a second thought. You could never be like him.” So the changeling eagle never gave it another

thought. And it died thinking it was a prairie chicken.

What a parable for many people's lives. How often I have met people who were born for greatness, blessed by God in every way. But they got older. They got cynical. They developed bad habits. They started believing what other people told them and never became what they were destined to be! Please hear this: God's expectations for your life may be a lot higher than you are willing to believe! And it doesn't matter how old you are. It is never too late to be the person God wants you to be! This Christmas God is blessing you with possibility. The light of Christ lives within you! Remember "God don't make no junk!" Now, that's bad grammar, but it's good gospel!

Want examples? The poetry editor of *Atlantic Monthly* returned a stack of poems to an aspiring poet with this note, "Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse." The poet was Robert Frost.

The University of Bern turned down a doctoral dissertation as "irrelevant and fanciful." The writer of that paper was Albert Einstein.

An English teacher noted on a teenager's report card, "A conspicuous lack of success." The student was Winston Churchill (*Signs of the Times*).

What about Jan Paderewski, the great concert pianist. When he was young, he left Poland to play his first recital in London. Before he left, he asked an influential compatriot to give him a letter of introduction to a leading figure in Britain's musical world, who might be of assistance should anything go amiss.

The letter was handed to him in a sealed envelope. He hoped that everything would proceed smoothly and he would not have to use it. He did not; his debut was a success and no snags developed. Some years later, while going through his papers, he came upon the letter and opened it. It read: "This will introduce Jan Paderewski, who plays the piano, for which he demonstrates no conspicuous talent" (*Bits and Pieces*, Jan. 9th, 1992).

What if Paderewski had opened the letter in the beginning? He may not have believed that he had the gift God had blessed him with. He may have not performed that first recital. He may not have become who he was created to become!

Nelson Mandela said:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us We ask ourselves: "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and famous?"

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

You are a child of God and the light of Christ lives within you. And if you remember that, nothing can ever overcome your light.

But it is also important to remember that the light of Christ is all around you.

The Light of Christ is All Around You

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." –John 1:14

This verse reminds us that if the light and beauty of Christ can manifest itself in the fleshy messiness of earth then it can be found anywhere and in anyone. If Christ can be seen in a smelly feeding trough, then there is no place or person off limits to the light of Christ.

A few years ago in Washington D.C., at a Metro Station, a man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. About 2,000 people went through the station, most on to work. At 3 minutes, a middle-aged man noticed the violinist for a few seconds and then went on his way. At 4 minutes the violinist received his first dollar. A woman threw money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk. At 6 minutes, a young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

At 10 minutes, a 3-year-old boy stopped, but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head the whole time. This action was repeated by several other children, but every parent—without exception—forced their children to move on quickly.

At 45 minutes, the musician played continuously. Only 6 people stopped and listened for a short while. About 20 gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

After 1 hour, he finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed and no one applauded. There was no recognition at all.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$200 each to sit and listen to him play the same music. This is a true story. Joshua Bell, playing incognito in the D.C. Metro Station, was organized by the *Washington Post* as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities (story adapted from forwarded email sent to me).

If we can miss something like this, what else are we missing? The light of Christ can shine through anything and anyone, so keep your eyes open.

The trouble is so many of us never experience the light of Christ in others because we make sweeping assumptions and judgments about people. And these assumptions and judgments cause the circle of people around us to become very small. We have a knack for putting people in categories: "They're mean. They're rich. They're poor. They're arrogant. They're successful. They're conceited." Often these categories cause us to push people away from us and blind us to the light within them.

I heard about a graduate of University of Georgia. She announced to her parents one evening at the dinner table that she had broken off her engagement to a guy with whom she was in love. When she told her parents of the breakup, they asked, "Did he cheat on you? Did he hurt you? Did he stop loving you?" To each question, she answered, "Of course not. He is the finest, most loving person I know." Then they asked: "Did you stop loving him?" Again she answered, "Of course not. I will always be in love with him." Totally confused, her mother and father said, "Then we don't get it. Why on earth are you breaking the engagement?" The young lady replied, "I just don't think I can bear to grow old with a man who went to Alabama!"

Arthur Caliendo remembers overhearing a conversation in a church hallway. One man said to another, "I always feel like you don't like me, and I have never understood that. Because in all the time we have known each other, you have never once even tried to find out who I am." It was a poignant moment for Caliendo because it reminded him that too often he was guilty of the same thing. He would make quick assumptions about people and push them out of his life. He would cheat himself out of possible friendship and support.

You want to have a religious experience? You want to experience Jesus? Then remember this: You will

experience Jesus in people and places the world has overlooked. Go to the people and places the world has overlooked, in the ugliest of places, the most unlikely of people, and it is then and there you will find Jesus. And if you are ready to risk loving them you will have that experience of God you long for. It's impossible to get close to God without getting closer to others and it is impossible to love others without getting close to God.

Mother Theresa said that in every person she saw the face of Jesus. She said that when she helped someone in need she saw Jesus in his most distressing disguise. So that means when you sit with the lonely kid in the cafeteria, you will experience Jesus. When you find that neglected and abused dog and care for it, you will experience Jesus. When you tutor a kid who has a terrible home life you will find and experience Jesus. When you reach out and love those who have been overlooked you will find Jesus and experience him.

If we want to experience the light of Christ around us, we must put aside our assumptions about people and places and open our eyes.

Most of all, if we want to overcome the darkness, we must remember to let the light of Christ shine through us.

The Light of Christ Can Shine Through You

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. –John 1:9

In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. –John 1:4–5

Dr. Thomas Malone is a psychiatrist in Atlanta. He says that people often ask him what psychiatry is all about. When they do, this is what he says, "Almost every emotional problem can be summed up in one particular bit of behavior: It's a person walking around, screaming, 'For God's sake love me!' Love me, that's all. He goes through a million different manipulations to get somebody to love him. On the other hand, healthy people are those who walk around looking for someone to love. And if you see changes in the people who are screaming, 'Love me, love me,' it's when they realize that if they give up screaming and go to the other business of loving another human being, they can get the love they've been screaming for all their lives."

Well, the greatest psychiatrist in the world, Jesus Christ, has been trying to teach us this for 2,000 years. When give our lives away, we will find life. When we give love away, we will find love.

Vic Pentz, the former Senior Pastor at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, tells an unforgettable

story of how one man's simple gesture of encouragement saved the life of his depressed colleague. One of Pentz's friends is a pastor in Seattle near Microsoft headquarters. He tells how a manager at Microsoft decided to live out his faith at work. The strategy he decided on was that instead of emailing people who sat just 10 feet away from him, he would actually get up and go speak with them, you know, like they mattered!

A few weeks after he started doing this one of his employees came into his office and gave him a brand-new version of a computer game, Xbox Live. The manager said, "Where did you get the money to buy this?" because he knew what he was paying the guy, and it wasn't that much. The employee said, "Well, I sold my gun." The employee continued, "You see six months ago my mother died and I was depressed. Then I started working here thinking it would help, but nobody ever talked to me except on email. So I looked up 'coping with dead mother' on the internet but what I found instead were suicide chat rooms. So I went out and I bought a gun and I have been practicing ever since. Every night I put the gun to my head with Kurt Cobain music playing in the background. And for the last month the safety has been off. And I knew that the only way you would ever know that I died would be if payroll notified you."

He continued and said, "But then last week you freaked me out. You came to my desk and you put your arm around me and you told me I was funny even over email, which is hard to do. And you told me I always get my projects done on time which helps you to sleep better at night. So I went home and sold my gun and I bought you this. Because for the last few months you have been complaining how much you want Xbox Live, but that your financial advisor, a.k.a. your wife, won't let you have it. So I bought this for you. So for my life, here, this is yours."

Someone once said, "Be kind to everyone because everyone is fighting some kind of battle." Never underestimate the power of the light of Christ within you. It could save someone's life. The world will be a better place if you allow the light of Christ to shine through you.

There is an ancient Christmas legend that tells of how God called the angels of heaven together one day for a special choir rehearsal. God told them that He

wanted them to learn a special song for a special occasion. Rehearsals quickly began. They rehearsed long and hard with great focus and intensity. Some of the angels complained, but God insisted on a very high standard for his choir.

As time passed, the choir showed great improvement. Finally, God felt that they were ready, but He had another surprise for them. He told them that they would sing the song only once and only on one night. God insisted that there would only be one performance of the song. Again, some of the angels complained. The song was so extraordinarily beautiful and they sung it so well. Why sing it only once? God only smiled and told them that when the time came, they would understand.

Then one night, God called them together and said, "It's time." He gathered them above a field just outside of Bethlehem and the angels sang their song. And boy did they sing it! "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will toward all." And as the angels sang, they knew there would never be another night like this one because there would never be another birth like this one.

When the angels returned to heaven, God reminded them that they would not formally sing that song again as an angelic choir. They could hum the song occasionally as individuals, but they would never perform it again. One angel was bold enough to step forward and ask God why. Why could they not sing that majestic anthem again? They did it so well. It felt so right. Why couldn't they sing that great song anymore? "Because," God explained, "my son has been born and now earth must do the singing" (James Moore, "Let Us Go Over to Bethlehem and Find the Peace of Christmas").



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