

A Light in the Darkness – January 4, 2015

John 1:1-18

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

When I was in college, I explored my first cave. It was in eastern Kentucky, and it was called the Bat Cave. It was not the hideout of the caped crusader and Dark Knight of Gotham City. Instead it was the home of several thousand small, winged creatures. From that experience I developed an appreciation for cave exploration, and I have since visited several other cave systems around the country.

There is something almost surreal about traveling through a cave. The temperature inside is constant, no matter the weather outside, and the environment is eerily silent, except for perhaps the sound of dripping water or cave dwelling creatures on the move. And ever present is the nagging thought that you could actually get lost or stuck inside, should something unexpected happen.

Now, if you've ever been on a cave tour, you know that at a point deep within the cave, the tour guide always does one particular thing. He or she instructs everyone to turn off their flashlights and mobile phones. Everything that can produce light must be put away. Then the tour guide will turn off all the lights in the cave. The darkness is shocking. Your eyes attempt to latch on to any source of light. The brain immediately sends signals to try to dispel the darkness, strange hallucinations of light that simply aren't there. But within a few seconds, you finally succumb to the darkness.

There is no light. You can put your hand directly in front of your eyes, and yet see absolutely nothing at all. The experience can be rather disturbing. People start to chatter among themselves, and you might hear a few nervous giggles among the exclamations of awe. It is quite an experience. Then the tour guide will strike a match, and you're amazed at how much illumination one tiny match can produce. After a few minutes the lights come back on and the tour resumes.

According to John, Jesus came into the world to shine as a light in the darkness. John's gospel does not begin like Matthew or Luke. There is no baby, no manger. No brave mother Mary or protective Joseph. There are no shepherds or angels or wise men. John doesn't tell us anything about the pregnancy or the birth. But John does tell us the beginning of the story. The absolute beginning. He tells us about the Incarnation and how Jesus had been with God since prior to Creation. John tells us neither the who nor the where of Jesus' birth. Instead, he tells the "why" of it. Jesus came into the world to dispel the darkness, to be a light to the world.

The first chapter of John's gospel is comprised of beautiful, poetic language about Jesus, or as John refers to him, the Word of God. This Word became flesh, became incarnate and made the choice to dwell with humankind as a human. The chapter is full of numerous metaphors and themes, but this idea of Jesus coming as a light to the world sticks out to me.

And maybe that is because of the times we are in. It doesn't matter what one believes about God or religion, most people can agree that times are rough. If you took a poll from people all over the world, you would probably find very few who consider the world to be in state of perfection. Far from it, between wars, disease, starvation, violence, and general unrest – the world we live in has its

problems. And this is nothing new. Throughout history each generation has its own experiences of struggle. John uses the metaphor of darkness throughout his gospel to illustrate the presence of hardship or evil.

The world we live in is full of darkness. The darkness didn't just happen. It had its cause. When I go on cave tours, the flip of a light switch can bring on complete darkness. Darkness results when there is a lack of light.

When we talk of spiritual darkness, we generally link it to the presence of sin in the world. Where sin exists, darkness often follows. The story of the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis, tells of the introduction of sin into what was otherwise a good creation. When human disobedience entered the scene, suddenly things weren't so good. According to the story, darkness was introduced into the world and has remained with us ever since.

The positive news is, darkness cannot exist on its own. Darkness can only occur due to an absence of light, and even a tiny match lit inside a darkened cave can make a huge difference. The small flame disrupts the immense darkness. The presence of light in the darkness will always make a difference. So what is the role of Jesus in all this? According to John's gospel, Jesus has come to be a light in the midst of darkness. He has come into the world to be a light to the world.

A problem for some people is that when you've lived so long in darkness, you become accustomed to it. You can't imagine anything different. Consider people who have lived in abusive situations for so long, they can't imagine life without the abuse, or they come to accept it as normal. Consider also people who are born into situations of poverty or homelessness. Because they are raised in these challenging environments, and don't know how to get out, they often repeat the same patterns when they become adults. Or when children are raised in environments of racism or hatred or distrust, those attitudes are perpetuated and the cycles continue. When you live in the darkness for too long, darkness becomes the norm.

Seasonal affective disorder is common to some people, especially in the northern hemisphere during the winter months where daylight hours are greatly shortened. The lack of daylight can cause depression in some individuals. Similarly when people live in spiritual darkness, it can have an effect on one's ability to experience or understand hope. The darkness can feel overwhelming. If people live surrounded by darkness, they often cannot recognize the light when it comes into their world.

And this was the situation surrounding Jesus. Many people did not recognize him, did not see him for who he was, did not understand him or his message. Time and again, in the gospel of John, are episodes in which people turn from Jesus and his teachings, because they are incapable of seeing what he represents. They are stuck in the darkness.

Have you ever woken up suddenly in the middle of the night and flipped on a lamp? For a few moments, the light from the lamp is actually painful to your eyes. You have to squint or turn away from the light for a while until your eyes adjust. When Jesus came into the world, he cast a bright light on people and on situations. For some it was too painful and so they turned away from him.

Others preferred to hide out in the shadows. They didn't want him to expose the darkness that surrounded them. Some people didn't want to come out into the light and chose to retreat and continue to live in the darkness.

Again part of the problem with recognizing Jesus is that for people who have lived so long in spiritual darkness, it requires a leap of faith to believe in who he is and what he represents. Stepping into the light isn't always easy. It requires making a choice and trusting in someone who is unfamiliar and strange. It requires believing in a God who loves humanity so much, that God chose to come be with us in human form. It requires believing in a God who actually came to walk for a while in our shoes.

When the light of God comes into our presence it demands a choice. One can stay hidden in the darkness, living in the anonymity that it provides. The darkness feels familiar and safe. When one has lived in it for so long, it becomes comfortable. But stepping out into the light exposes oneself – causing one to be vulnerable. Weaknesses once hidden are now open under the scrutiny of the light. Flaws are laid bare. Coming into the light is act of intimacy and trust, opening one's soul before God. Entering into a relationship with God can be frightening to some. But this is what God desires – relationship with each of us. Reconciliation. An end to estrangement.

This was the message that Christ brought so many years ago, and is the same message he brings to us. Once a person has chosen to step into the light that Christ brings, life suddenly changes. Things look better in the light. Have you ever noticed that in an art museum, many paintings have a light source shining on them? Light makes colors brighter and exposes intricate detail. Light is warming and inviting.

In Christ we see God. He has revealed to us the true nature of God. For those who want to see God and understand God, Jesus Christ provides all the light we need to discern the truth about God. Once we have been drawn into the light of God's love through Jesus Christ, we become natural extensions of that light. Jesus is the light by which we see and know God. His light shines in us. And as we bring that light into the world, others see Jesus Christ in us.

It is not enough to simply bask in the light for our own benefit. Living in the light is not easy. It requires us to shine the light of Jesus Christ in the darkness around us, including our own darkness. We become bearers of that light and bring it out into world. Remember, sometimes people who live in that darkness don't want to be exposed. There are those who know nothing but darkness and the light is foreign and frightening. It's hard to turn away from the darkness that has become the norm. People may think we're strange. People may turn from us. People may oppose the message we bring.

For us, living in the light is hard work. Life is simpler in the comfort and familiarity of the shadows of non-interference and apathy. Living in the light forces us to acknowledge the darkness that our own lives and habits perpetuate. The light exposes our flaws and sin. But we are called to step out into that light and share it with the rest of the world. To make a difference and to shine a light in the darkness. To show people the light of Jesus Christ. To offer a beacon of hope where despair is normative. Even if they turn away.