

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday, Dec. 30, 2018 Christmas 1C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: John 1:1-18
Theme: Merry Defiant Christmas!

The beautiful prologue of John's gospel starts with "In the beginning..." which is not only a new creation story but code language for what is always and everywhere. John's gospel is a mystical gospel that tells the story from the 30,000 feet level. John's Gospel is historically represented by the eagle, high flying and sharp-eyed. The eye of the eagle sees what others do not, John articulates what is eternal in the flow of time, what was true at the very beginning and will still be true at the end of time. John's mystic gospel moves us up into a higher vision of the significance of the event of Jesus Christ's birth for the whole of space and time.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1).

Words are important to human beings. Yet sometimes it is hard to put things into the words we desire. I'm sure you've had the experience of sitting next to a brooding hurting friend and saying, "tell me what's wrong." "Talk to me." We are hoping that she will disclose her inner thoughts and feelings. If she is unable to speak, she remains isolated in a real way. Of course, we can try to guess and make things up but that is dangerous business and sheer speculation. We need our friend to speak their own truth, to disclose what is happening inside of them. Sometimes it is incredibly difficult to put into words what is happening inside of us, especially if we are unsure or lack confidence in our own understanding. And there is the fear of disclosure which means being open and vulnerable. Our words are not always perfect nor are we in using them, but without them we as people are not known. Speech is a way of revelation of opening ourselves to others.

John uses something we as humans know about, words, to describe the reality of God. The Word is not only with God, the Word is God. God is by God's very nature dedicated to self-revelation. God wants to be known. God reveals Himself/Herself. The nature of God is to show Himself/Herself to communicate with creation, to desire to be in relationship. God is not private, tuned out, or self-absorbed. God is essentially relational. God is a Word, constantly communicating to God's very own creation.

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 (John 1:2-4).

God, the infinite One, creates finite reality through his powerful and creative Word. The Word is the source of everything that is. Through the One, the many come into

being. John's gospel is not only concerned about the things themselves: tulips, tigers, frogs, song birds and humans but the very life-force that flows through them. The creative act of the Word is not a one-time event. Creation continues. The spirit of God continues to sustain all that it has made. God is constantly creating life and holding it in being. This means that God is not distant but near. The distinction between Creator and creation is not a separation, there is always a connection through the life-force of the Word's creative action. This is the Spiritual life that Jesus is identified with in the Gospel, the same life-force that is present throughout creation.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people (John 1:4).

John's cosmic story continues by pointing out that we can have this life within us. When the life that is everything enters human beings, it becomes "Light." This light enables humans to sense the connection between themselves and the divine, the connection between the life that flows through all creation connecting it to God. The light that human beings are capable of having is awareness, a consciousness of God's presence and more importantly our ability to cooperate with the Divine life. We are not only meant to be conscious of the light of Christ but to discern and partner with that light cooperating in the repair of the world.

But the story is not all sweetness and light. The human condition, the world you and I live in also contains darkness. Darkness is the lack of an awareness of the divine life and the belief that the world is actually separate from God, distant. We are all capable of living in darkness, losing our awareness of the connection with God and becoming insensitive to our rootedness in God's self-giving love. Every one of us knows something of the darkness but it is a vastly inferior way of being. Darkness is often arrogant and violent, grasping and deceptive. John's Gospel tells us something important however, though darkness is powerful and pervasive it is no match for the divine life. It cannot comprehend or conquer the light. The light is stronger than the darkness. God's life is the true light of the world and will not be overcome. This is the good news of the Gospel, the charge of the light brigade is unstoppable though darkness may seem strong, the light of God is resilient, patient and ultimately victorious.

The gospel would not be necessary if darkness was not endemic to the human condition. We all are prone to live in a darkened consciousness where we fail to see our true relatedness to God. We are all prone to live in separation. It is when we step into the light, or a community of faithful people helps us to see the light, that we begin to recognize the darkness for the sham that it really is, the twistedness of its reality. When we become aware of the life-giving relationship that the Word desires with us, the darkness is unmasked as, an enemy of the light. Lest we think that the spiritual life is neutral, darkness is an active force that competes and challenges the light. It wants the light put out. However, the good news of the gospel of Christ, of the child in the manger, is that no matter how strong and prolonged and fierce the

attempts of darkness, it will not be victorious. The light shines in the darkness and always will shine in the darkness. This is not in question but it requires a choice to believe, a decision to have faith in the creative resistance and ultimate victory of God.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:4-5).

There is an old Cherokee story I came across this past week while reading for this sermon called "Why Some Trees Are Evergreen," that may help us to wrestle with this contrast of light and darkness in a surprising way.

When the plants and the trees were first made, the Great Mystery gave a gift to each species. But first he set up a contest to determine which gift would be most useful to whom:

"I want you to stay awake and keep watch over the earth for seven nights," The Great Mystery told them.

The young trees and plants were so excited to be trusted with such an important job that the first night they would have found it difficult not to stay awake. However, the second night was not so easy, and just before dawn a few fell asleep. On the third night the trees and the plants whispered among themselves in the wind trying to keep from dropping off, but it was too much work for some of them. Even more fell asleep on the fourth night.

By the time the seventh night came the only trees and plants still awake were the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the fir, the holly, and the laurel.

"What wonderful endurance you have!" exclaimed the Great Mystery. "You shall be given the gift of remaining green forever. You will be the guardians of the forest. Even in the seeming dead of winter your brother and sister creatures will find life protected in your branches."

Ever since then all the other trees and plants lose their leaves and sleep all winter, while the evergreens stay awake.

- Cherokee Story

This beautiful story does not use the images of light and darkness but speaks of greenness in the midst of barrenness and associates this greenness with vigilance or the ability to stay awake. Staying Awake is spiritual code language for being aware of our life-giving connection to God. Just as the light shining in the darkness reminds us of this vital connection we have to the creator, so does the beauty of the evergreen boughs of the forest amidst the dark and leafless trees.

G. K. Chesterton once said of the Christian faith and practice that, "A religion that defies the world should have a feast that defies the weather." I love this saying. It reminds us that Christmas, while a feast of surpassing beauty and the tenderness with Mary mother mild and the infant Jesus, is also a feast of with an edge to it. Christmas has a certain in-your-face, not-in-my-house quality to it as well. No matter how much you think that the world around you is headed straight into the abyss and darkness of hell, it cannot snuff out the light or wither the greenness of the guardians of the forest.

Christmas is really about defiance when you think of it. The light will not be overcome. God is always capable of doing a new thing with the light, smuggling his very self into the manger of humanity at Bethlehem or who knows what else. Creation continues and so does revelation. The barrenness of and darkness of winter is arrested and interrupted by the verdant Evergreens. No matter the darkness or the barrenness around us, no matter the things beloved that seem profaned and desecrated, the darkness cannot overcome the light or wither the greenness of the forest.

In fact, perhaps one way to summarize this sermon is by imagining an unusual Christmas card that one commentator dreamed.

It would be a Christmas card that featured a picture of a light shining in the darkness or of an evergreen glistening green in the midst of a barren forest. Inside the card would read: "Have a Defiant Christmas!"

Or since we are supposed to have Christmas in our hearts all year long, to take the loving child Jesus to our own loving hearts our own thirsty souls that are longing for the light, the card might wish everyone a "Defiant Life."

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Defiant Christians, Christmas Christians know that the world is in need of compassion, love and justice. They know that the world does not seem fair and that too often the darkness seems to be winning but, children of the light are defiant and will not allow darkness to win, to overcome the light with God on their side.

Defiant Christians also know that each of us has an inner life, that when it is open and receptive can receive the compassion, love and justice of God. And if we can receive it into our own broken and hungry hearts what God is only too willing to pour into our lives, then we can find creative, wild, generous ways to share that light of God with others. This is what it means to be a defiant Christian, not to fall into the trap of accepting the way the world is as inevitable or necessary. Rather, defiant Christians, defy the current state of affairs, see the status quo as temporary, envision a far different way and work toward a world that God desires because they are in touch with a better way, a way of light that cannot and will not be overcome.

So, I don't know how you are doing this Christmas Season, maybe you've limped into the season hurting and discourage and heartsick about the world and its darkness. But today I challenge you to let Christmas, and the birth of this child, through whom all things were made do its mysterious and beautiful work. Allow yourself to see the light shining in the darkness, drink in the greenness of the trees refusing to give in to the barrenness of winter around us. Let this Christmas be a time to recharge your spiritual batteries, to reconnect your life to the life that is the light of all people, and then walk into January recommitted to being God's person in the world. Go into this New Year a defiant Christian energized for a defiant life in service to the "grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ." Happy Defiant Christmas! May it lead each us to a defiant life where "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it." Merry Defiant Christmas!

I wish to acknowledge my considerable debt to the writing of John Shea about a defiant Christmas and his hilarious idea about a Christmas card with that theme. May we all grow into defiant Christians who will not allow darkness to overcome the light.