

Have You Heard This One Before

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, December 25, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Christmas Day

John 1:1-14

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Movement 1 – The 20/20 Intro

Well, we’ve made it! We have waded through the seas of wrapping paper, we have forced our way through the choppy waters of excited shoppers fighting for that one present which promises happiness, we have sent all of our cards (maybe), we have baked the cookies, we have donned the red sweater and the pearly smile for the Christmas party, we have decorated the tree, we have hung up the lights, and we have gone through all of the rituals and procedures that are necessary for this holiday season. It is finally here and we have made it; it is finally Christmas. For some, today can feel a bit anti-climatic after all of the anticipation and expectation which was building up. But for others today is the climax, or at least a real stopping point for a journey of faith.

It can feel like you have just broken through the tree line when hiking up a mountain. It is an amazing moment for any hiker to break through the towering pines, and begin to traverse the bare rock. You can look back and see where you have been. You can look up and see where you are going, and things start to make sense. That is today! We have broken through the tree line of Advent and we have reached a preverbal summit with Christmas. But before running the last leg to the top, let’s take a moment and look back, think about the path we have been traversing through the holiday season, and then peer at the summit toward which we all head.

Take a moment to reflect, to think, and to ponder the wonder and glory of this day, for we have finally made it to Christmas!

Movement 2 – Remembering Advent

Do you remember what Advent was like? It was not that long ago, but many try to bury the experience. Do you remember the rush, the hectic feelings, and the anxiety over presents along with the added pressure to act happy? Do you remember my sermon on the first Sunday of Advent – how it is not time yet for singing, and it is far from the “most wonderful time of the year?” Advent was the end of fall and the beginning of winter – the trees were losing their leaves, the snow was beginning to collect on the ground, the sky was graying and darkening. Advent was a time when we read passages from Isaiah to a people in despair, a people in exile, a people who looked around and saw that things were not right with the world. Advent was a time when we were waiting and perhaps also felt that we were in the wilderness, in exile, and in despair. I have seen many faces looking bright and happy in the beginning of Advent, but turning drawn and haggard by the middle and towards the end. We are filled with such cheer with the thought of Christmas, but the promise must carry us through four weeks, and four weeks is a long time. The darkness of the world begins to edge in, the darkness that the gospel of John speaks of that is a part of our lives, our culture and our very existence becomes a looming reality in Advent. Maybe you have noticed the darkness of greed when you hear of people trampling each other for presents and think that this is not how the world is supposed to be. Maybe you have noticed the darkness of despair when you pass the starving and homeless in Philadelphia and think this is not how the world is supposed to be. Maybe you have noticed the darkness of violence when you think of our armed forces away from home,

surrounded and caught in cycles of violence and think that this is not how the world is supposed to be.

Maybe in your own life, the darkness of the Advent season has crept into your consciousness. A lost loved one, a rupture in the family, a strain on finances, and even the frustration of decorations can lead one to a despair and recognition that things are not right with the world and not right with your life. Advent is a time of waiting for Christ, and when we are waiting the darkness of the world becomes prominent.

One movie that captures Advent well is *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* starring Chevy Chase. Chase's character goes through a number of fiascoes and pitfalls and things seem to get worse and worse. His derelict brother visits, a squirrel is found in the tree, the turkey is dry, and things seem to get worse and worse. Eventually the tree is caught on fire, and then Chase finds out that his company bonus was not what he was expecting and the darkness of the world becomes overwhelming.

Things are not right with the world, which we recognize in Advent, and we try to make them right with shopping, with cards, with parties and with cookies. But we cannot offer enough light to counter the darkness of the world. We cannot offer enough to make things right. Remember that Advent is a time when we are waiting and hoping for Christ as if Christ is not yet here – and thus the presence of darkness. This is the Advent that many live, that causes our world to groan, and that we have all worked through. Do you remember what Advent was like?

Movement 3 – The Emptiness and Darkness of our Lives

Can you claim this darkness in your own life? Maybe not today, but at one point or another, have you felt this kind of grief, this kind of longing that things are not right with your life? This knowledge that something is missing, that there is a longing, darkness in your world and that there is a grief and a gap in your life that is longing to be filled? The story of Thomas Merton, the great modern day mystic and Christian writer is a story of one who lived a life of parties, of hedonism, and of false relationships. It is a story of someone who one day woke up and realized that all in his life was empty and hopeless and that he needed more. Or a friend of mine who lived in South Africa during the apartheid era who did not know how bad things were until he had the opportunity to go through the shanty towns and see the segregation. Or a youth that I took to Mexico whose eyes were opened when he saw how so much of the world really lived. It was at that time when he realized that things are not right with the world.

It is an existential longing; it is a deep desire to be in a relationship with God and to see God's presence in the world. It is a justice and mercy longing in our world – a desire to be the kingdom that God has created us to be. When we wait for Christ as if Christ is not yet here, Advent just accentuates that desire and brings it to the fore. Yet Advent is just a microcosms of our lives and of the world. We have all been in that place of longing, of darkness and of looking. This is what the Gospel of John is speaking to – the darkness that looms, that looms from the beginning of creation, that looms through creation and that looms in our lives. It is no wonder the voice of Isaiah cries out in the wilderness, because we find ourselves there again and again. The world is their again and again surrounded by darkness. And we rush and run and try to climb out of our darkness, try to find some hope and try to find some meaning in our lives. It almost becomes mechanical and void of emotion as we climb to the top of any ladder and find that the darkness continues higher. There is a children's book called *Hope for the Flowers*. In this book a caterpillar finds a pillar of caterpillars trying to climb to the top. So he jumps in and tries to climb up as well, hoping to find some meaning and purpose in his life. Yet when he reaches the top all he can see are other many other pillars of caterpillars engaged in their own climb towards nothing. There is no point but to look busy and act important even though there is nothing at the top.

It would seem that Sartre's predictions were right and in the end, nothing has any meaning. The longing and the darkness still lingers. Life without Christ, life without God, life without peace, life without justice and mercy is not a full life at all. Have you felt this emptiness or seen it in others. Can you claim this darkness in your own life?

Movement 4 – The Gift of the Baby?

On this day, God invites you to step out of the darkness and see the gift that is offered – the gift of the child. God comes into the darkness and offers light. Imagine that you are standing in the darkness and you see a light shining from a stable. Maybe this is the hope and the peace that you are looking for, because it is shining so brightly. Maybe this is what you so greatly desire in your life! So you go towards the light, you work your way through the crowd, and you peek in the stable to find out what it is that is cutting through the darkness, and what do you see but a baby lying in the manger.

Now be honest with me. After going through Advent, after living the grief and emptiness that is a part of all of our lives, that is life without Christ, can you find hope in a baby? Can you find the hope that is to bring fulfillment and peace to your life? Can you look at the babe in the manger and understand what is so special and powerful about this one child? In a world where so much is wrong, what kind of gift is this? In lives where there is so much hurting, and emptiness and people looking for fullness what kind of gift is this? What is so special about this baby that causes so much excitement, that causes Herod to worry and that causes shepherds and angles to bow down? We need hope and we hear the cries of the baby. We need deliverance and we are given a sleeping child. We need peace and we are given a newborn – diapers and all. What kind of gift is this? What kind of promise can we find in this Christ? How does this baby, so helpless and hopeful make things right in the world? Every time I read the birth narratives of Matthew or Luke, every time I see a Christmas pageant, every time I see the manger scene in front of a church or home I find myself wondering, “so what.” Children are born every day in the most interesting of circumstances – so what makes this baby different, special, and hopeful for the world. I’ve heard the story before again and again, and I wonder what changes in my life because of a baby born two thousands years ago. For this is what God offers to us, the gift of a child.

Movement 5 – The Story of Hope in the Gospel of John

Through the Gospel of John we can understand this gift of Christ. The Gospel of John offers a different story of Jesus, one not of a birth, but one of the divine becoming human. In the Gospel of John, Christ is the Word, the one who is with God, through whom all things came into being, and in whom is true life and light offered. That baby lying in the manger was there when God separated light from darkness. That baby lying in the manger was a part of all of creation, preexisted all creation. That baby lying in the manger will offer the hope and life that we can only receive through the Word, the Logos, and the very essence of the divine that is Christ. This is one who brings all who believe into the family, the household of God. Do you see this in verse 12 and 13? That through Christ we will be children of God. We will be in a relationship with God as a parent is with a child. The Gospel of John pulls us into a relational experience with God. It calls us to be God’s children through the one, the Word, the light come into the world. Only because the Word becomes flesh can we know and emulate that relationship with God. Only because of the incarnation can we be shown a true and full life. Through Christ we are given a light that offers life, that offers hope, and that makes things full through his own fully human life. This is the story that we find in the Gospel of John. Not a story of cows and shepherds, of goats and angels, or of straw and Magi, but a story that begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is a story that begins with us, that enters into our darkness and that offers us hope. The Gospel of John is not telling how Christ was born, in what fashion, or in what manner, but why Christ was born. The Gospel of John is offering the gift of Christ, and this passage, this prologue almost brings us up to the life and the salvation that Christ offers to all of us in a full relationship with God.

The biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, describes this passage as one of God’s divine, sacred presence, one that offers a hope which stretches beyond time. We work our way through the crowd to the manger and see the baby, knowing that this baby is the one through whom all things came into being. This baby is the one through whom life and light will be known. This baby is the one who will do what we cannot, make us full children of God. Luke and Matthew offer the story of how Christ was born. But through the Gospel of John we

understand why.

Movement 6 – Following the Revelation

From here we are called to follow the Christ into the darkness of the world. Christ is here in the world and offer hope to our lives; it is a hope which must be lived. Let's follow him, and see what it is that this profound and amazing gift offers and how it will effect our lives. Let's follow him and see where Christ leads us into the world. Let's follow him and hear his words, watch his deeds and allow him into our hearts. The gift effects us from the get-go, as the babe looks up from the manger, into your eyes and you know that you are loved as a child of God. The baby looks up from the manger, into your eyes, and you know that no matter who you are or what you have done, you have forgiveness and a chance to live again. The babe looks up at you and the darkness washes away like rain washing dirt from the pavement, and in that moment, you know that everything is now right with your life. This gift, this light, this hope and this life draws you and leads you. It pulls you from your own ways to Christ's ways. You don't want to leave, but stay by the child's side, basking in the warmth of the light and the love. That is the gift of Christ.

This is just the beginning of the story. Advent sets us up, reminds us of our own darkness and our own despair. The birth of Christ brings the hope into the world and into our lives, but we are not yet done. We will continue to walk with this Jesus and live the miracle of the incarnation. This is the miracle that the Word did become flesh. This is the miracle that the Word did walk with other, and experience what is wrong with the world. We walk with the Word, and watch him offering compassion to the stranger, hope to the homeless, love to the hungry, and peace to the suffering. Can we do the same? Can we live the same way that the Word, Christ, and the one through whom all things came into being and through whom all things will know life? Can we live the same life when we notice all that is not right with the world? The hope of the incarnation says yes, the grace of the birth offers us the possibility, and the power of the cross yet to come offers us the forgiveness when our selfishness gets in the way. The gift of this day offers hope and life, and convicts us all to live out that hope and life. Can you experience it? Can you live it? Can you share it? The glory of the Lord has shone, is shining, and will continue to shine in the world and in our hearts on this day and every day.

AMEN