

Christmas Day 2024

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-12

John 1:1-18

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God's revelation shines like a light in deep darkness. No descriptive characteristic of God is mentioned in the creation account. God is left a bit enigmatic and unknown. The Aramaic translation of Genesis captures the early moment of creation this way: "The earth was waste and empty and darkness was upon the face of the abyss, and a wind from before the Lord blew upon the face of the waters."¹ The Presence of God is a mystery hidden in darkness. Spirit, breath, and wind are all used to interpret the Hebrew term "ruach". Jesus compared the Spirit of God to the winds that come and go giving life as it moves along the way. "And the Lord said, let there be light; and there was light. And the Lord saw the light, that it was good."² The light penetrates and drives out the darkness in creation. Yet God remains veiled behind the darkness. The Word is God revealed, and the light was the mark of God's presence. It is as if God views the light from behind the veil, and He calls it good because it clears away the darkness as a cool breeze chases away the summer heat. It is God's will to work through physical darkness, breaking in with the light of His revelation in creation, at Sinai, in the Tabernacle, in Mary's womb, and in the darkest tomb.

Physical darkness hid God's creative work from Adam when God made Eve. First, God "threw a sleep upon Adam"³, thus God was in darkness from Adam's perspective. Then, God reached into the darkness of Adam's flesh and drew the material for life from his side. God continued to reveal his will for Adam as the Divine Presence brought forth new life while Adam slept. God breathed into Eve the wind of life. Now, it is not clear from the text, but it says God brought the woman to Adam. I read this as God placing the woman near the man as he slept. God may have been observing at a distance, eagerly awaiting the reaction of Adam like a parent who has strategically placed the perfect Christmas gift. God's will is that man should not be alone. That will was first revealed in the creation that took place in the darkness of Adam's sleep and was drawn from the darkness of his side. But what a gift to wake up to! Adam declared, "This time, it is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."⁴ The humble Lord must have been filled with joy at the success of His enterprise.

At Sinai, we are told that God spoke to the people amidst thunder and thick clouds. This is where God revealed the 10 Commandments to His people. The awe of that moment caused the people to say to Moses, "Speak to us yourself, and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."⁵ The people remained at a distance while Moses approached the "thick darkness"⁶ where God was hidden. From there in the darkness, God revealed His divine teaching, the whole of the Torah with all the mitzvot, or good deeds to be fulfilled. This holy word shines in human hearts, ennobling our character and instructing us on what God expects of us. In Deuteronomy, Moses says, "The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."⁷

¹ Tov Rose, *Targum Onkelos: The First Five Books of the Bible* (London: Tov Rose Publishing), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Exodus 20:19.

⁶ Exodus 20:21.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:14.

One command is the prohibition on crafting anything in the image of God. The easy target at this point would be to accuse you of failing at this, arguing that you craft idols out of your own egos and worship many of your own creations instead of worshipping God. And that is true. However, there is another direction worth considering. In creation, God was left without a physical description. The only image bearer for God was and is man. I would argue that the prohibition on image crafting is based on God's desire for us to see the divine image where He placed it; in our fellow man. James says, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse man, who has been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be so."⁸ Sinful though we are, God hides His likeness in your neighbor. Our hearts cannot be trusted, and darkness often pervades our flawed psyches, yet there is a divine spark in us. Something that differentiates man from animal. Our task is to see that light of God through human darkness. I have had people tell me they found God. I know what they mean by this, but I did not know He was lost. And the reality is that God was in search of them, and God found them. God was never lost, and He is still to be found in the mysteries of the sacraments and in His sacred scriptures. But if you are looking for God, if you want to serve the Creator, start by serving your neighbor whose body is the tent that houses God's likeness. It is not God who needs your works. Your neighbor does.

The Tabernacle was the tent Israel carried around after the events at Sinai. The main tent consisted of a Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Behind the veil of the Most Holy Place, God's presence was surrounded by darkness. The Holy Place was lit by the lampstand which the priests kept burning, but where the Ark of the Covenant was, where God was enthroned above the cherubim, it was dark and veiled in mystery. God's presence dwelled in the midst of the people of Israel. By His presence, they were made holy. God's will was for ancient Israel to carry God around in a tent. His holiness would go with them. The rite of atonement on Yom Kippur involved the high priest breaching the veil to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat of the Ark. Life and holiness were extended to the people, and they continued to carry God from place to place as they wandered through the wilderness. Behind the veil, hidden in darkness and the mystery of a profound ritual, the light of God's grace was revealed in forgiveness and holiness.

Mary's womb was a place of physical darkness, not unlike the Tabernacle that housed God. There in the hiddenness of Mary's body, the breath of God came over her and spoke the infinite Word into her womb. In the moment of incarnation, the Living Word was made living flesh. The humility of Mary, an example of how God exalts the lowly, was seen in her acceptance of what God was using her for. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."⁹ Like the Tabernacle before, Mary became the human tent of divine dwelling. She would carry God around for nine months. When the fullness of her time came, she gave birth to the Christ child, the Savior of the nations. Under the dark Judean night, veiled behind human flesh, hidden in the dark stall, and feeding trough, lay the light of joy, hope, and glory.

Christmas can become a misguided enterprise if the message ends with the nativity. Christ did not come just for the sake of being born. The darkness of the Judean night would give way to the darkness of the betrayal under the same starry Judean skies some thirty years later. A wooden manger upon which Jesus was enthroned would become the throne of the cross, where Christ in His Passion would wear a crown of thorns. Darkness would engulf Him as He took His final breath, giving His Spirit back to the Father as the winds of ransom and forgiveness swept over

⁸ James 3:9-10.

⁹ Luke 2:38.

creation. A spear would pierce His side, and from the wound would flow the source and substance of our life in Him. Those who remained with Jesus through the crucifixion and His death removed His sacred body from the cross and placed Him in the tomb. Darkness and despair were to be overwhelmed in the most significant way. Light and life would spring out of the darkness and God's grandest revelation would come forth, not in darkness, but in the light of Easter morning, the light of restoration. From the waste and emptiness of the tomb, the recreation of the world began. That restorative moment became yours in your baptism into His death and resurrection. That restorative moment is yours, even now as you take His life into yourself through the veiled presence of Christ in, with, and under bread and wine.

God has brought us to this moment as a part of His will. He chose you to participate in His mystery. We stand in awe of the mystery fulfilled in Jesus. We receive what He alone can give; life, forgiveness, and salvation. It has come to us like the wind. We need not know from whence the wind of the Spirit blew upon us, breathing the breath of His life into us. We need only believe that it has happened and that God has done it. We have been given the right to become children of God. So, as children, let us rest with Him in the manger. It is fitting for us to pause in celebration of His birth. But we must not stay in restful ease. For we will run our race with Him, following in the way He has shown. Our life is found in Him Who has no darkness, and from out of our own darkness He has brought us into His light. Let us praise Him as we rejoice in His birth, in His mysteries revealed. Let us take joy in the light that has driven away the darkness from our hearts, our souls, and from the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.