

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

I do hope that you appreciated the lights on our Christmas tree on the way in, and perhaps you can have a special look at them on the way out. I say this because I nearly killed myself putting them in the tree this year. That's a job that normally goes like most jobs in the parish to Walter, our administrator. But this year it fell to me, and I am decidedly wobbly up ladders. I was slightly worried that I'd be joining the 15,000 people who every year go to ER as a result of light hanging injuries. I wouldn't have bothered if we'd only had a service at 3:00 today. But knowing that we have this service at 5:00 and one at 8:00, I thought I'd do it - worth having the lights up despite the danger because you can appreciate them when it's dark outside. Whereas at the 3:00 they pass by without noticing.

We need darkness to recognize the light. The first Christmas happened in the dark. The shepherds, we're told, were watching their flocks by night, so that when the angel of the Lord appeared to them, the glory of the Lord shone around them in the dark night sky. It was as the prophet Isaiah had foretold. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them, light has shone." Jesus came into the darkness.

In the church life we prepare for Christmas. Unlike the rest of the world who go around jollifying everything, we go into a season of advent, four weeks where we strip the church of all the flowers. We use somber colors. We remember the darkness of sin and evil, which can so dominate our lives and the world around us. In advent, we're very mindful of the dark because we realize that it's only when we notice the dark that we recognize the coming of the light. And in Jesus, as St. John says, "the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world." Jesus, the light of the world, the light of all people shines in the darkness and their darkness cannot overcome it.

In a world darkened by fear, oppression, and sin, Jesus brought grace, compassion, and understanding. The light he brought was from a different source from what ordinary human beings possess. It was the light of God, a bright and clear light that probes the darkness of the soul and reveals the promise of the future. As Dr. King reminds us, darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.

And the light of Christ is not a dazzling light. It's not like the light of the angelic host which appeared to the shepherds. The angels said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid," because they were scared stiff by what they saw in the heavens. When the artists depict that scene, the shepherds are often turning away from the angels, covering their face to escape the brightness. By contrast, when the artists depict the birth of Jesus, we see an image of the baby Jesus and people looking into the manger with a gentle, kindly light emanating from the manger. I once saw a Christmas pageant. The names of the players were all listed. Mary was played by Katrina someone, Joseph was Kevin. The part of Jesus was played by a 40-watt light bulb.

The light of Christ is not a dazzling light. It's a welcoming, comforting, inviting kind of light. It's the kind of light which shows us the way. It's the kind of light we'd like to see if we were lost alone in a forest at night. Imagine how excited we'd feel if someone with a light appeared and led us out of the dark forest. In the midst of the darkness of the forest, we'd appreciate the light.

Jesus, the light of the world calls us to follow Him. He invites us to follow Him out of the darkness. And the light Jesus brings is a light to be shared. Jesus once said to His disciples, "You are the light of the world. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. Rather, they put it on a stand so that it gives light to everyone in the house."

Those who follow Jesus are to be bearers of His light. The light that has come into the world is a light that is to be shared. As Howard Thurman said, "when the song of the angel is stilled, when the star and the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are at home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the work of Christmas begins. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart." That's the Christmas challenge for us.

Is there a dark corner that we can take that light of Christ? Where might we be able to illuminate a dark place? Maybe that dark place where the light needs to shine is within us. I pray that you may walk in the light of Christ this Christmastime. Amen.