



Christmas at John's House

TEXT
John 1

December 23, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We are invited to John's house this week. There's only one more house after John, and that's your home. But we will get to that tomorrow night. Thank you for hosting us all. That's kind of you!

But first, let's stop by John's house. He lives right downtown, not far from the university. Luminarias line his sidewalk, leading you to his front door. John's house is not decked out with overwhelming lights flashing everywhere. There's no manger scene on his front yard. There are no magi leaving presents under the tree. There are no sheep grazing in the back yard. There's just simple light, the kind that makes you aware of the contrast between the light and the darkness.

Stop by on any other day, and John would want to tell you a story, a moment from the ministry of Jesus. He is a master storyteller. It's John who tells us of Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by the cover of night. They talk about salvation and being born again. It's more than Nicodemus can process, and he leaves pondering.

And John tells of the Samaritan woman at the well and the noontime conversation Je-

sus has with her. There are 100 reasons that conversation should never have happened: He was a man, she was a woman. He was Jewish, she was Samaritan. He was a rabbi, she was of insignificant status. The conversation shouldn't have happened, and had any other man been at that well, it wouldn't have happened. But it was Jesus, so they talked about the things that matter the most.

There was the man born blind, and Jesus opened his eyes. No one celebrated this work of grace. The Pharisees accused Jesus of the sin of bad timing: healing on the Sabbath. The man's parents distanced themselves from him. The blind man, now healed, says, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I cannot say. I only know once I was blind, but now I see." John alone is the teller of this amazing story.

He is a master storyteller, and John knows how important it is to know these stories of Jesus' ministry. But when he comes to Christmas, the story is not enough.

At John's house, there is no manger or magi, no angels or anthems, no shepherds or shining stars. There's just a word and a little light in the darkness. Which is why at John's house,

we find him in a modest library where the bookshelves are lined with the Hebrew scriptures and works of Greek philosophy and ethics and all the poetry he can find. His books are scattered all over his desk and strewn across the floor, for John is struggling to find the right words — words that are big enough, words that are mature enough to speak the truth of the incarnation. John is searching for the right words because John knows that words matter. John knows that "words make worlds."¹

John knows that words that are false or dishonest or too casual carry corrosive power; they cause rust and erosion. Dishonest words destroy. They are a tiny vocabulary that anyone can use. But John knows that words of truth can create a world. They create new hope, new love, a new day. He's searching for the right words, and his task is not easy — because he needs to describe light, and he needs to describe a world-creating love.

For this, John needs poetry. He stands on metaphor ... because it's not enough to be true, he must speak truth. In the beginning was the word, he says. The Logos, the Greeks would call it — the very mind and heart of God. That Word becomes flesh.

The eternal becomes bound by time. The creator becomes creature. The immortal condescends to walk in the shadow of death. The word became flesh and lived with us, and the light shines.

John's desk is littered with scraps of paper as he scratches out his poetry, writing to the light of a single candle. It's not too much light because John knows that in this world, light and darkness, good and evil, joy and pain . . . they battle. Day after day, they battle.

My friend Rev. Joe Clifford is pastor of Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. He says, the situation in the world today reminds him of the opening paragraph of Dickens' great novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."²

This is how Dickens saw his day, and my friend Joe says, it sounds like our day. John knows this: The battle between the good and the evil, between the whole and the broken, between the best and the worst is not just Dickens' time, or John's time, or our time. This battle *defines* time.

If we were to get the Christmas we want, then our Christmas list might request a day with no

shadows. Let every relationship be defined by love. Let every encounter be one of justice and kindness. Let every nation be guided by values. Let the light be so strong, the darkness evaporates.

But that is not the incarnation that John knows. Instead of total victory, we get something painfully modest.³ The light came into the darkness of this world, and the darkness did not extinguish it. The light has come, but the battle continues. Life has come, but the shadow of death remains. Love breathes in flesh, but love in this world is crucified. We always live in the best of times and the worst of times. But John knows a word that comes as light and life. This light does not destroy the darkness, but it is a word that is strong enough to keep you human in a world of inhumanity.

On July 2 this year, John Volanthen lifted his head from frigid waters in the depths of a Thailand cave, and for the first time in nine days, 12 little boys and their 24-year-old soccer coach saw light emanating from Volanthen's flashlight. On the afternoon of June 23, they had set out for a brief exploration of the cave, a birthday celebration for one of the boys. But monsoon rains came and chased them back into the depths of the cave with rising waters cutting off escape.

After nine days of darkness, on July 2, there was a little light shining in the darkness. The darkness didn't go away, but it was enough to create a new world, a new hope. John knows a word, a life, a light like that. It's

not enough to destroy the darkness, but it is strong enough that the darkness cannot overcome it. It still shines.

John leaves us with these world-creating words: "In him was life, and the life was the light for all people."

My friend Scott Black Johnston says, in John's house, he leans forward and whispers to us: God refuses to watch our hardship from a safe distance. Christmas is God climbing into the darkest places to be with us — to light a candle alongside us.⁴

The writer Anne Lamott tells a story from her son's early childhood. Anne had taken 2-year-old Sam to Lake Tahoe for a vacation. It's a place I have never been, but Lamott says, the rooms have blackout curtains that block all the sunlight for the convenience of those who stay up all night at the casinos and choose to sleep by day.

One afternoon Anne put her son down to sleep in his playpen in the completely dark bedroom, while she went to do some writing in the adjacent room. A little while later, she heard the toddler knocking on the door from the inside. Somehow he had managed to get out of the playpen, and push the button on the doorknob and lock himself in. He was calling, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying, "Just jiggle the doorknob, darling, push the button again."

Of course, he could not see the doorknob in the darkened room, and when it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door, panic set in. He began sobbing.

Anne did everything she could to get the door to work, called the rental agency where she left a message, and called the manager, running back and forth to comfort her young son. All the while Sam was in the dark, terrified. Finally, she did the only thing she could do, which was to lie down, and slide her fingers underneath the door through the space at the bottom of the door. She told him to bend down and find her fingers. He did. They stayed like that for a long time, his tiny finger tips touching her fingers in the dark, reaching across the divide.

My friend Agnes Norfleet says, “That is what God does for us in the birth of Jesus. God lies down on the floor of the earth, and reaches out to us — finger to baby finger.”⁵ God reaches into our darkness with a word, a light that is life. The darkness will remain, but this life is strong enough to keep us human.

These are the best of times, and these are the worst of times — because that is always the battle in time. So, do this: Don’t worry about the dark. Don’t let life be defined by the dark. Pay attention to the light — for God refuses to watch the hardship of the world from a distance. God is crawling down into the darkness to light the candle of life, and it may seem small. But it is enough.

¹Krista Tippett. *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living* (Penguin: New York, 2017), p. 16. I am grateful to my friend Rev. Joe

Clifford, who made this connection in his sermon “Merry Messes,” preached at Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

²Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

³Scott Black Johnston, “Christmas at John’s House,” preached for Day 1, Advent 2018

⁴Ibid.

⁵Rev. Agnes Norfleet, “The Holy Family Within,” preached at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, December 24, 2015

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.