

Darkness and Light

First Sunday after Christmas – John 1:1-18

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 30, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Merry Christmas.

The area just east of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. is not what anyone would call the best of neighborhoods. I have read that things have changed some since then, but years ago when I was attending Virginia Theological Seminary across the Potomac in Alexandria, the Capitol Hills area of D.C. was notable for all the wrong things. As in any big city, I suppose, the glitz and the glamour and, in the case of our nation's capital, the pomp and the pageantry, that so delights both tourists and heads of state is made possible by armies of janitors and groundskeepers, security guards and bus drivers, fast food workers and push-cart vendors, all of whom earn little but must live with the inflated cost of living in the aging inner city. Such conditions make for neighborhoods like Capitol Hills of the early 1990s, a place of profound poverty and the equally profound portion of the problems that always follow in poverty's train. During the day, with many of the area's inhabitants busily engaged in their work at the *margins* of conspicuous consumption, the place was mostly empty and depressing even to visit. At night, though, the depression became despair and often overt *danger* as hard-working families surrendered their streets and alleys to the conduct of commerce in guns and drugs and human flesh.

So it was that during the second week of Christmas in 1992, at least one Virginia seminarian was nervous about participating in a planned caroling trip to bring some small glimpse of Christmas cheer to the dark streets of Capitol Hills. It seemed the right thing to do. Like many of my classmates, I had little or no financial help to offer. With a quick trip home for the holidays and the requirement to use part of our break for a special class for first-year students, I didn't have much *time* to offer either. But I did have a passable singing voice, so when the call went out for people to participate in the caroling trip, with considerable reservation of my own, and even more from the Martindale family designated worrier, I joined our little roving choir.

We carpooled down into the city, parking our cars in the relative safety of one of the lighted lots between the Capitol building and the Library of Congress and began walking east in the relative safety of the lights along Capitol Avenue. That wasn't the purpose of the trip, though, so we turned south a few blocks and then again east to walk warily between dark lines of row-houses, some reasonably well cared for, and others boarded up - though not *quite* abandoned. As we walked, we sang – *Away in a Manger, O Come, All Ye Faithful, O Little Town of Bethlehem* – though around us all was anything *but* calm and bright. Occasionally, *occasionally*, a family would unbolt a door and step onto a stoop to listen, or even sing with us for a moment. But mostly, little knots of people congregated in the shadows of stoops and doorways, either hurriedly broke up with our approach, or stopped whatever they were doing to smile at us, with indulgence more than appreciation.

As we walked further from the Capitol Mall center of power and tourism, the proportion of lived-in-looking homes to those with uses less obvious continued to change, until we all became aware that we had passed some ill-defined line between ministry and menace. Just as we had come, without really talking about it, to the decision to turn around and begin the trip back to our transportation out of the city, we came to yet another empty alleyway between two decrepit buildings. As we turned at the mouth of *this* alley, though, the flashlight held by the upper-classman leader of our group reached into the first ten or twenty feet of the alley, and several of us – most definitely including yours truly – jumped with the realization that the alley which we, in our naiveté, had assumed was empty, was anything *but*. The beam of light cut through the darkness of the alley to expose a *world* of activity of which we had been unaware. On one side of the space, *something* exchanged hands as a group of young men in similar over-sized

jackets moved further down into the darkness of the alley. On the other side, a woman quickly adjusted her too scanty for the cold night clothes as a man dressed uncharacteristically well for the neighborhood let out a small curse as he turned away from us. Further in and nearer the ground, the light of the flashlight glinted off a bit of glass, calling our attention to the burning ember fueling the pipe held by someone else crouching in the darkness. Within maybe two seconds, the area bathed by our flashlight had been completely evacuated and, other than low murmurs of complaint and another sizzling flair from the addicting flame, the alley appeared to be as empty as we had first thought.

“What has come into being in the Word was life,” the Gospel of John declares, “and the life was the light of all people.” “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” That’s the way light works, isn’t it? My Daddy the science teacher taught me when I was just an itty-bitty that darkness is nothing less, and nothing more than the absence of light. When light shines into the darkness, darkness is not just dispelled, it is gone. Darkness, my Dad reiterated *has* no physical existence.

And, dear friends, let me assure you, that darkness has no *ontological* existence, either. That is, not only does darkness not truly exist in the realm of matter and energy, time and space, but darkness has no genuine reality in the realm of spirit and eternity, either. “What has come into being in the Word was life,” our Gospel declares, “and the life was the light of all people.” “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The Light of Christ came into the world and darkness tried to fight it back, only to find out that when light shines into the darkness, darkness is not just dispelled, it is *overcome*, it is *destroyed*.

The darkness of this broken world, the darkness of our Accuser, the fallen Teller of Lies, will not stand – because darkness has been dispelled by the coming of the Light. The darkness of human need and the darkness of human greed will not stand – because darkness has been overcome by the *victory* of the Light. The darkness of our pain, and the darkness of our grief, and the darkness of our sin, even the darkness of our death... *will not stand* – because our darkness has been dispelled, because our darkness has been overcome, because our darkness has been *destroyed* by the Light of Life, born in Bethlehem, crucified on a dark hill, burst forth from an empty tomb, and seated now and for all eternity at the right hand of God. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

We stood there at the mouth of that alley, for what must have been a full minute, frozen by what the light had exposed. Perhaps our upper-classman leader should have led us right out of there, but he stood as stunned as the rest of us. The circle of light created by the flashlight’s beam was now completely empty, but we stood there very much aware, perhaps for the first time that evening, of the deadly danger of the place to which we had come. Then someone among us – I don’t think it was me, but I couldn’t even swear to *that* – *someone* began to sing: “Silent night, holy night...” One by one, we broke from our daze and joined whoever had started: “All is calm, all is bright...” Then, from the other end of the alley came a tentative voice: “round yon virgin mother and child...” and then another: “holy infant, so tender and mild...” A chorus of sorts echoed from both ends of the alley, separated by a small patch of light: “sleep in heavenly peace... sleep in heavenly peace.”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God... 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... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

Merry Christmas.