

Advent 1: Christ's Gifts that Turn our World Right-side Up

#1: Love in the Midst of Hate

John 1:1-14 and Romans 13:8-13a (GNT)

By John Gill

Is there anyone out there (besides me) who gets frustrated with Daylight Savings Time? I always have trouble adjusting to the change – not so much in the spring, when we turn our clocks forward, but in the fall. I just can't get used to it getting dark so early! I used to take a walk at 7:00 in the evening – and now, it's pitch black! By the time Jeopardy is over, it feels like it's time to go to bed! I guess I just don't really like the dark.

In an online article published on the site, "Elemental.Medium.com," there appeared an article written by Maya Kroth, entitled: "Darkness Can Do All Kinds of Things to Your Body and Brain: In the absence of light, how do your body and mind behave?" This is what she wrote:

"In 1962, French geologist Michel Siffre started going underground. He conducted a series of experiments that involved sending human subjects — including himself — into dark caves alone, for months, without any clocks or calendars or contact with the outside world, aside from daily check-ins with his research team above...

Siffre's goal was to study isolation, but in the process, he wound up showing that humans have a biological clock: an internal mechanism that controls when the body sleeps and wakes, among other functions. In the cave, without exposure to natural light, his subjects' internal clocks fell out of sync with the 24-hour day/night cycle taking place above, warping their sense of time...

Siffre's work formed the foundations of chronobiology, which may explain why darkness seems to have such a profound impact on our bodies and minds...

(the author goes on) ...Darkness can affect us all, and in surprising ways. Science suggests that darkness can do all kinds of things to the human body and brain: It can make us more likely to lie and cheat, make mistakes at work, and even see things we don't normally see. Darkness is like a mirror: It shows you what you don't want to see."¹

It's no wonder that humans seem to be naturally fearful of being in the dark. The feeling is so universal, that Darkness has become a powerful metaphor in every culture.

"We know that without light there would be no life on this Earth, so we have come to associate darkness with Death. The English language has internalized the love of light and the demonization of dark so that, metaphorically, light stands for intelligence, purity, and freedom both psychological and spiritual,... while darkness signifies degradation, depression, Evil itself..."²

There is no denying that we as a nation are currently living in a time of darkness – Covid, Political divisions and strife – threats of violence – nuclear tensions – Climate Change... the list seems never-ending.

And for some of us, even in our personal lives we may be feeling as if we are trapped in a dark and gloomy space – dealing with physical limitations, battling illness, the ravages of aging, grief, financial hardship, family troubles, or unforgiveness and hard feelings between friends. Yes, perhaps you are experiencing a season of darkness right now, and wonder if there is “light at the end of the tunnel.”

Is there any Hope?

That is the theme of our sermons during this Advent season. Is there Hope for those of us who are feeling shrouded in darkness?

Absolutely – that is what the coming of Jesus is all about! During these weeks, as we light our Advent candles, we will be considering “Christ’s Gifts that Turn our World Right-side Up.” This morning, how the advent of Christ brings us “Love in the Midst of Hate.”

Jesus came into a world of darkness and trouble, as well – a world filled with cruelty and hate and the threat of violence. Lest we forget just how dark and foreboding the world Jesus entered into as a baby was, the Gospel of Matthew tells us it wasn’t long before the Holy Family had to flee for their lives from the vicious hatred of King Herod – and dozens of innocent baby boys in Bethlehem were victimized, slaughtered in their own homes. That’s a part of the Christmas story we tend to gloss over, because it is so morbid and disturbing, but we dare not. Yes, the world Christ came into was every bit as dark and hate-filled as the world we know today.

I suppose it’s just “the way of the world.” Our society tells us “It’s a dog-eat-dog world” out there! Therefore we are advised to: Look out for #1 and ignore the needs or hurting of others; - that life is a zero-sum gain, so it’s OK to take advantage of others; The end justifies the means – so, seek revenge, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; Find a scapegoat for your problems; Never accept blame, never take personal responsibility, never apologize, and certainly never show weakness.

That is the way of this world – the way of hate. We see it every time we turn on the TV news, or pick up a newspaper, or click on our social media. It drives our wars and social dysfunction. It justifies our predatory business practices. It corrupts our politics. It destroys the unity of our nation. This way of darkness – this hate-filled way of the world – only leads us to ruin.

The great preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick once described the foolishness of hate, when he said, “Hating people is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat.” Or, as Mohandas Gandhi is believed to have said: “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.”

The Apostle Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians (chapter 5) described the way of the world like this:

“What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature... What human nature does is quite plain. It shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions; in worship of idols and witchcraft. People become enemies and they fight; they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups; they are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these. I warn you now as I have before: those who do these things will not possess the Kingdom of God.”

But, Christ came into the world to show us a new way – the way of love. Christ was sent into the darkness of our world to offer us a better way.

In chapter 5 of Galatians, the Apostle Paul goes on to describe this new and better way: “But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires. The Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives.”

Yes, Jesus came to us to take the way of the world, and turn it on its head – to turn it “right side up.” The way of the world leads to darkness and death. The way of love that Christ brings leads to light and life.

In the third chapter of John, Jesus is talking to the Pharisee Nicodemus, who has come to him in the darkness of night to seek illumination. In that encounter, Jesus speaks of why he came into the world – those most familiar words we all learned as small children: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” But, then Jesus continued. Listen to what Jesus says to Nicodemus: “...the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

This is the answer to the existential question we are asking in this dark and gloomy Advent: Yes, there is Hope! Love is the light of the world. In the Advent of Christ, the power of love is “the light that shines in the darkness,” banishing our gloom, and offering us hope.

Among the most profound things Martin Luther King, Jr. ever said was this: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Like love, light is powerful. Darkness cannot exist where light is present. As John said in the opening of his Gospel (which was read earlier in our service), “The Word (that is, Christ) was the source of life, and this life brought light to people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.”

I fervently hope you have personally experienced the hope Christ brings – that no matter how dark your life may seem, the light of Christ shines in your heart, banishing the gloom and giving you joy in

the midst of your troubles. If not, my prayer is that this Advent and Christmas, you will invite Christ to come in and shine in your heart.

And, if you already do have the Light of Love in your heart, then this Advent and Christmas, let the light shine for all to see. In scripture, it's worth noting that Jesus says both - "I am the light of the world" and that "you are the light of the world."

Our world that doesn't know Jesus – our neighbors seeking for hope and meaning in these dark days – are desperately searching for light, the light they see – IN YOU! As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven."

We are called to be people of the light – not only that we might know hope, but can bring hope to our troubled and darkened world.

In the article I quoted at the beginning of this message, Maya Kroth wrote that "Darkness is like a mirror: It shows you what you don't want to see." That may be true.

But, Hope is also like a mirror. Like a mirror, we are to reflect the Light – the love of God - onto others. "Let your light... shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven." As people who have received the love of God in the gift of Jesus, we are able to love all people – and share with them the hope we have in Christ!

Just as Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, he says to us: "The only obligation you have is to love one another... If you love others, you will never do them wrong... You must do this, because you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep. For the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed. The night is nearly over, day is almost here. Let us stop doing the things that belong to the dark, and let us take up weapons for fighting in the light. Let us conduct ourselves properly, as people who live in the light of day..."

Or, as Confucius is quoted as saying, "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

¹ <https://elemental.medium.com/darkness-can-do-all-kinds-of-things-to-your-body-and-brain-beb3d0da2fb4>

² <https://josna.wordpress.com/tag/metaphors-of-darkness/#:~:text=The%20English%20language%20has%20internalized,in%20the%20Dark%20Ages%2C%20the>

³ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/12/27/eye-for-eye-blind/>