

Have Yourself A Defiant Little Christmas - John 1:1-14

Slide: Light

I want to tell you a story. It's not the story about two parents who make their way to Bethlehem; nor is it the story of angels and shepherds, who come to worship the newborn King. It is not the story of wise ones or of the corrupt King Herod, who slaughtered innocents of Judea as Joseph and Mary stole away their new son to Egypt as asylum seekers.

It is not these stories I wish to tell this morning. The story I want to tell is, indeed, a birth narrative, and it is also a piece of the Christmas story, but this story contains within it the very beginning of all things. It includes all of creation history. It is the story of the light that came into the world as flesh, who had being in the beginning, who without him, nothing came into being. It is the story of the Incarnation, God, as God's Word, a fleshy God, who came to the world as one of us.

As beautiful as this story

is, it is full of mystery and wonder. It is not as tangible like the story we get from Gospels of Matthew and Luke. To me, the story of the stable, the star, and the manger is tactile, tangible, all five senses story. There are smells to smell, sights to see, and noises to hear. There are angels, shepherds, sheep, mangers and a harrowing journey to find room in an Inn.

Yet, how can a person smell, see, and hear the beginning of creation? How can a person fully understand the light that was first called into being...Let there be light! But, whatever we envision when we hear John's version of the Christmas story of God coming to be one of us, one thing is certain. It's difficult to commercialize and pack it up in a nice little cultural red bow. We can wrap, package, and send scenes of the nativity as Christmas presents, but how would you wrap, package, and send *light*?

We can become quite saccharin over the shepherds and the virgin mild, as some of our Christmas carols and

Christmas cards reveal, but we can never sentimentalize the light which not even darkness can overcome nor swallow up whole. John's telling of the Christmas story stands in stark contrast to Luke and Matthew's account. John's Christmas story tells about darkness and light and the defiance of that light against the darkness. This is not a sweet defiance, but a blazing, resistance to what darkness can be in the world.

John's Christmas message is not the lovely Christmas Carol, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." I think his message is instead: "Have Yourself a Defiant Little Christmas." John's Christmas is all about a defiant struggle against darkness. Now, can you imagine a Christmas song called "Have Yourself a Defiant Little Christmas?" The radio would never play it! And here is why...

As a society, I don't think that we like to talk much about darkness at Christmastime or at any time for that matter; that is, the kind of darkness that notices the reality of life's sufferings. I think we strive to

be happy and have joy, and to some degree we feel we deserve it on a day like this one. We long to have Christmas cards that say, "Merry Christmas", and we need that celebration we so rarely take the time to have. We desire to eat too much, drink too much, and sing happy Christmas carols. Who could blame us?

But, when bomb cyclones and severe changes to the climate cripple us, when Afghan women are banned from education by gunpoint, when Ukraine is without electricity due to war, not to mention daily struggles to cancer, addiction, suicide and even poverty itself, the true reason of Christmas needs to be proclaimed:

That the baby Jesus came not for our happiness; nor did he come so that we would feel good about ourselves, but he came for the sake of our struggles against the darkness.

In this country, I especially get a sense that no one wants to be challenged on our need to strive for justice,

even in or especially church where the challenge must sometimes come! Rather, the emphasis is to focus always on staying apolitical so as not to offend anyone; but we are blindly living our lives if we do not also look at the darkness and to define what that is together, to be defiant against it together. As much as we want and need comfort, positivity, and a focus on the good, there is much darkness, barrenness, and inhospitality in the lives we lead, and we need to, at Christmastime, defy those things.

And, as Children of the light, which we are called to be, if we choose Christ, we also choose Christ's path, and that path is not waiting while the darkness closes in, nor is it a kind of happy, happy theology. It's a path of struggle against any darkness we see in our lives and in the world. In fact, this Gospel message...this Good news of Jesus Christ is not always a comforting one.

To say that the Good news is always *joyful* news would be to deny the ultimate Christmas promise: That Christ was born

to die, and even though Christ ultimately conquers the darkness at the empty tomb, he defies that darkness while walking with us down a road of suffering and ultimately death.

The question is how do we celebrate this kind of Christmas of defiance in our culture of privilege? What are the things we should defy if we were to? Maybe your health is not good, or the health of those you love. Maybe you are waiting for test results over the holidays? Maybe a loved one died or your relationships are difficult and in need of repair. Maybe you feel alone, to the point where you think even God has left you. Or, maybe you are called to bring help to the poor, or called to help people be responsible for the wellness of God's creation, or strive against the system of racism.. How is it that *you* struggle against the darkness today? What is your Christmas light against the darkness?

In this Gospel reading that we have from John, the writer shows us that we have the power for the defiance of

which I speak. We are deeply connected to the Light, Jesus Christ, who came into the world to destroy darkness so completely, that darkness couldn't even comprehend the light to begin with.

Yet, we have a choice, too, whether we will remain blind by the darkness, passively, or defiantly struggling against darkness as Christ does. *We have a choice.* We can allow that darkness to enfold us, even to the point where we, as John says in the Gospel lesson, do not know the light ourselves. Or, we can be defiant, struggling against the injustices of the world, just as Christ does, never allowing the darkness to fully overcome us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed near the end of World War II for his part in a plot to kill Hitler, was well aware of this struggle against darkness. He had the opportunity to flee from Germany many times, but he felt he needed to be there, to fight against what he saw. Near the time of his execution, he wrote this:

“But, alas, amid the world’s myriad wonders, there is also a note of sadness. Christ was in the world; and the world came into being through the Divine Word; yet the world did not know Christ. We can choose to turn from light to darkness. We are free to live as one-dimensional, fragmented persons in a one-dimensional, fragmented world. But, such senselessness cannot ultimately quench the power of God’s Creative Word. I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil. Even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose, [God] needs [people] who make the best use of everything. “The light shines in the darkness, reads John’s gospel, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Christmas *is* a story about angels, shepherds, and the star. It *is* a story about the stable, about the mother who was favored and the father who was right with God. Christmas *is* a story that is joyful and beautiful, and it *is* full of wonder. It *is* a story of comfort and there are times for preaching comfort, which I often do.

But, Christmas is also a hard story, one that challenges us. Christmas is the story of the light that came into the world and was not known by the world. Christmas is Christ, the one who would give himself up to the darkness to conquer it. This story is a challenge for us today if we choose to follow Christ by defying the darkness instead of ignoring it, or avoiding it, or succumbing to it.

It is a constant struggle that we, too, as disciples of Christ venture into dark places on purpose, so that we may bring our own light to the world. So, instead of making you feel completely comfortable today by wishing you a Merry Little Christmas, although I do indeed, let me posit instead a challenge for this New Year that will dawn upon us, a challenge that is embedded deep within the Gospel itself:

Have Yourself a Defiant Little Christmas and let there be light! Amen.