



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

All Years, RCL, First Sunday After Christmas

The Reverend Dr. Susan Loy Lyon

Isaiah 61:10-62

December 31, 2017

Psalm 147 or 147:13-21

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. 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. *John 1:1-5*

These first five verses of today's Gospel reading form the introduction of what is known as the Prologue to John. They are sublime. They are poetry, perhaps a hymn, a complex theological Trinitarian statement about Christ's identity and mission. I should stop the sermon here and sit down, but I might be fired! Really though...what is this Prologue? Let's take a look.

John's Prologue may be viewed as a Christian midrash, a sort of "story between the words" of the first chapter of Genesis. Genesis 1 proclaims the first account of creation, in the very opening of Hebrew Scripture. Both John's Prologue and Genesis 1 start with identical words: "In the beginning"! Genesis then says the earth was a "formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..." To the Hebrews, deep meant a watery chaos. Moreover, the deep was covered with darkness—a double, total chaos. But God then created order out of chaos. Now the first thing God creates is light. God separates the light from the darkness on the first day. On the fourth day, God creates lights "in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night..." The sun, moon, and stars. God spoke, communicating the cosmos into being. This is becoming pretty exciting!!!

John's Gospel boldly declares that Christ Jesus was the Word, the communicating Person of the Godhead who brings into existence a new creation. He was in the beginning, was with God, was God, and through and in the Word every single thing came into being. Life out of chaos. Life which was light shining in the darkness. And the darkness did not overcome it!

I know that I'm a card-carrying introvert and private, but I've decided to share a bit of my story. I grew up in a small town in Illinois, on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, just upstream from St. Louis. We lived

on a quiet *cul de sac* of five houses, surrounded by woods and pastures. But in this idyllic location, my brother and I were the neighborhood hellions. Among the mean pranks we pulled: jamming potatoes into Mr. Casper's tailpipes (may he rest in peace!); building waist deep booby traps along the wooded trail where Mrs. Buxton walked her kids everyday to and from school (may she rest in peace!); taunting Mr. Milquetoast Timmons and painting his doorknobs with honey (may he rest in peace!). (Some names have been changed to protect the innocent!) You see, my brother and I covered the *cul de sac* in deep darkness. And I am not proud of it now. One Christmas, we sneaked into the bushes at the Bengals' house (may they rest in peace!). The Bengals always had the most extravagant seasonal light display among the neighbors. Remember your physics? If you disable one light that has been wired in series to other bulbs, all of them are disabled. You guessed it. My brother and I unscrewed one bulb in the Bengals's yard. The whole place went black. Of course, the Bengal's knew who was responsible, immediately reporting it to our parents. We kids had to apologize to the Bengals and then return to their yard to figure out which bulb out of thousands we had unscrewed, in order to resurrect their dazzling display. The light again shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it! Now I'm called to be a deacon, perhaps as penance! "Almighty God give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light..." *Collect for Advent 1.*

Everyone experiences darkness and chaos, from the blackest of caves to a more simple case of post Christmas blues. The Psalmists understood myriads of kinds of darkness and chaos...and, they were quite descriptive. Feeling overwhelmed? “I have come into deep waters, and the torrent washes over me.” *Psalm 69:4* Wavering in a fickle spiritual life? “I am sinking in mire, and there is no firm ground for my feet.” *Psalm 69:2* Enduring bullies at school or work? “Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head.” *Psalm 69:5* Suffering the consequences of our own sins? “O God, you know my foolishness, and my faults are not hidden from you.” *Psalm 69:6* Being persecuted for your Christianity? “Surely for your sake I have suffered reproach.” *Psalm 69:8* Feeling outraged over unfair treatment? “Despite my love, they accuse me.” *Psalm 109:3* Agonizing in the bleak night of mental illness? (Even in our pews mental illness will strike 18% of us in any year). How about substance abuse? A bad diagnosis? Fights among family and friends? Gnawing hunger? (25% of Arkansas kids go to bed hungry.) Frightening environmental disasters? The threat of intercontinental ballistic missiles from rogue nations? You name it! Darkness and chaos are rampant on this planet!

But the good news! Our God promises the darkness will *not*, NOT overcome the light — any more than my brother and I could extinguish the Bengals’s brilliant Christmas display. So remember that the next time the goblins crawl out in the middle of the night and you awake in

an anxious sweat. Pray for the light of the Word. John's Gospel is fact: "The true light, which enlightens everyone has come into the world." Some will not accept him and choose darkness. Yet, "...to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God...born of God." *John 1:18* St. Paul writes: "...you are children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness." *1 Thess 5:5*

Now becoming children of the light is no more an instantaneous event than the growth of a Japanese Maple. Nor are darkness and light immediately two distinct entities. Like eyes that must adjust from the black bedroom to the blinding glare of bathroom lights at 2:00 a.m., the progression of sightedness is gradual. Remember one of the times Jesus healed a blind man? At first the man only saw the silhouettes of trees and people; then slowly he regained his 20/20 vision. We try. We fail. We get up again. When asked about his many attempts at inventing the light bulb, Thomas Edison said: "I have not failed. I've just found ten thousand ways that won't work." In other words, the life of God's children is a transformative journey from dark chaos to the clearness of day. After all, it took God six days (or six million billion years) to create order out of chaos. Transformation is by definition a "RE- word: remodeling, reshaping, reconstructing, reorganizing, reordering, renewing. Christ is the seventy-seven times seven billion watt transformer! Perhaps this is what John's Prologue means in verse 16:

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” *John 1:16*
Abundant growth in the God-Man, Christ Jesus. Transformation from chaotic darkness to light occurs by God’s grace and our intention, individually and in community. It requires every light bulb to be screwed in for the whole string of believers to become the light of Christ. Christians aren’t meant to be solo lamps on a hill, but whole Christmas trees of colorful twinkling lights, illuminating the world with the Good News.

So, my brothers and sisters,

Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of this world.

All things break. And all things can be mended.

Not with time, as they say, but with intention.

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.

The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

L. R. Knost

Amen.