

“Darkness Holds God”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

This week we conclude the Advent midweek worship series titled, “Holy Darkness.” We have seen how, in the Genesis story, God was in the darkness bringing forth light, saying, “*It is good.*” Last week we reflected upon the call of the prophet Samuel at night and his response, “*Here I am, speak, for your servant is listening.*” God has always been present in the darkness creating light and giving the grace of faith that frees us to live for others.

In the reading from Luke about the Annunciation, Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear a child and name him Jesus, which means “Yahweh is salvation.” There is no indication in Luke’s gospel that the Annunciation to Mary took place at night, or at a time of darkness, yet Luke’s words indicate that Mary “was much perplexed” – words suggesting that her thoughts were *in darkness*. All of us can certainly understand this. The English idiom, “to be in the dark,” of course means a time when someone is “uninformed” about something, or when we may feel uninformed or without understanding about what we should do.

The announcement to Mary is meant to help her understand her role in God’s salvation story and how she should respond to God’s call. Yet Mary also questioned the angel, asking, “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*” The angel told Mary of how her relative Elizabeth, in her old age and thought to be barren, was also expecting a child. Elizabeth’s child would be named John, and he would baptize Jesus. Gabriel answered Mary’s question, saying, “*For nothing will be impossible with God.*” Though Mary was perplexed and perhaps even fearful, the angel reassured her that for God the impossible thing does not exist.

From Mary we receive the first great example of Christian hope and faith. The earliest name describing Mary in the church was *Theotokos*, means “the bearer or the mother of God.” Mary gave birth not only to a child but brought the incarnate Word, Immanuel “God with us” into the world.

Yet Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed, was also having doubts about Mary and her pregnancy. Matthew’s gospel tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid, and to take Mary as his wife because the son she would bear “*would save his people from their sins*” (Mt. 1:21). The angel calmed Joseph’s fears and he did as the angel had commanded him. God led both Mary and Joseph from darkness and doubt into the light of faith. Mary’s response is

recorded in Luke, *“Here am I, let it be unto me according to your word”* (Lk. 1:37).

As we think about Mary and Joseph, much of the narrative about Jesus’ birth contains the interplay between darkness and light, between our nighttime fears, and the light of God’s salvation. For example, the shepherds also received the good news of Jesus’ birth as they watched their flocks at night; the Magi were led from the east by a bright evening star to Bethlehem; and not long after Jesus was born, the holy family fled under the protection of night to escape King Herod’s senseless murder of innocent children. God used the darkness of night to bring the light of salvation through Jesus to all people, and God comes to us still in the darkness of our fears offering hope.

Yet it is perhaps John’s gospel that most compellingly uses darkness and light to give theological meaning to Jesus’ birth. John describes how the creation of the cosmos and all that has life was made through the *Logos*, the Word of God. The Word is the light of all people, and as John writes, *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it”* (Jn. 1:5).

Christmas is not simply the story about the birth of a child; it is the good news that God creates life and light out of the darkness through Jesus. John’s words speak of this: *“The true light that enlightens every person was coming into the world”* (Jn. 1:9). From the very beginning, the church has always understood that darkness is holy. Indeed, we sing the carol, *“O Holy Night”* describing the holy light that guides us in the darkness and nighttime moments of our lives.

You know, it is really fascinating to me that unlike so many other holidays, the Nativity of Our Lord is celebrated almost universally around the world at night under darkness on Christmas Eve. Consciously or unconsciously we live out the narrative of Jesus’ birth by lighting the darkness not simply with electricity, but more profoundly with the warmth of candlelight that speaks deeply to our shared humanity with so many who knew darkness illuminated only by a small flame.

We are modern people, children of the Enlightenment and of its progress, and yet the good news of the holy night of Jesus’ birth continues to enlighten us in the darkness of our own world, giving hope and direction to our lives. Faith is the small flame of Christ Jesus lighting the darkness.

The angel’s words *“For nothing will be impossible with God”* inspire us also to respond like Mary. In the darkness and nighttime fears of our own lives, Mary encourages us to say, *“Here am I, let it be unto me according to your word.”*

Darkness is holy. Darkness holds God. May Jesus, the light of the world, continue to save and enlighten you in the darkness with the flame of faith, making you holy. Amen.