



HOLIDAY HOME TOUR

★ CHRISTMAS IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS ★

Christmas at John's House

John 1:1-5

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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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.

We are on our third leg of our Holiday Home Tour: John's house. We've been visiting each of the four Gospels, exploring the way that each of them tell the Christmas story.

First, we visited Mark's house. Mark's house is smaller than the rest, strictly functional. There's no outward signs of Christmas anywhere in sight — no tree, no lights, no wreath, no shepherds or sheep, and not even a baby, because in Mark's gospel, he's worried less about where Jesus is born and more about where Jesus can be found, here and now. After Mark, we visited Matthew's house. Matthew's house is an honest-to-goodness mansion. It has to be, because in Matthew's gospel, the Christmas story starts with an enormous family reunion. Everyone is invited, absolutely everyone, and at Matthew's house there is more than enough room for them all. Today, we're visiting John's house. On Christmas Eve, at the evening services, we'll visit Luke's house. And after that, well, I think the entire point of Christmas is that Jesus comes to reside with us. So after Christmas Eve, Jesus will be at your house, and you will have to choose how you will tell the story.

But today we're visiting John. John's house is a little harder to find than the others. It's set back from the road a bit, enough that he's set out luminaries along the path to light the way, the same way we will on Christmas Eve, to help everyone find their way. Inside, each room is lit with a candle. Just one candle per room. By the light of those candles, though, you can see piles of books stacked up in every corner, and not a single one of those books is dusty, because these books aren't for show — they are the ancient stories of faith and he reads them over and over and over again. In the living room, there's a fire in the fireplace and two rocking chairs pulled up in front of it, because the only thing John loves better than reading a good story is telling a good story. So John's house invites you to sit down and stay while — especially at Christmas.

"In the beginning," John says, and for a moment it's not clear whether he's reading us an old story or telling us a new story, because "in the beginning" is the way the story of creation begins. It's the way Genesis tells us about God fashioning the heavens and the earth. But then he continues. "In the beginning was the Word," John says. *Before you and me, before plants and animals, before land and sea, before sun and moon and stars of night, even before light and darkness, in the beginning, before there was anything else,* John says, *there was God, and there was the Word of God.* The way John understands it, you can't tell the story of Christmas without going back that far to know that the first words the Word ever spoke were, "Let there be light." According to John, that's what Christmas is all about: the light that has always gone before us. "The light shines in the darkness," John says, "and the darkness did not overcome it."

One of my favorite things to do this time of year has always been to go on a walk after it's gotten dark out and enjoy the Christmas lights people put up. Adjacent to my church back in Kansas City is a

neighborhood called Mission Hills and I would often end my days by strolling down different streets for a bit before heading a home. I will never forget this one house, tucked far back in the neighborhood. They only put lights on one tree outside. It was a relatively small tree. But I could only assume that every strand of lights they ever owned was on that one tree, and I could also only assume that they bought out Target and Walmart and Amazon each year. Every light in every color you can imagine, in every shape you could associate with Christmas and a few you couldn't, was wrapped around those branches. It was as if Clark Griswold focused all his attention on one, eight foot tree. It was an assault upon the human eye. It was actually too much. You needed sunglasses to walk down that street in the middle of the night.

I remember telling a friend that if John had seen this house when he was writing his gospel, he might have written, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness didn't stand a chance; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness completely and utterly ceased to exist." I wish John had written it that way, because that is the kind of world I would like to live in. One in which every sadness, every heartbreak, every raw deal, every evil agenda, every painful, debilitating disease completely and utterly ceases to exist. But John doesn't write it that way because John writes the truth, about the world and about God.

The light John writes about is painfully modest. The light John writes about dances on a wick, ever aware of the threats all around. It would not take much, it seems, to extinguish it entirely. A glance at the morning headlines, an awareness of what is going on in the day to day lives of just about anyone sitting in this Sanctuary, a reminder of the unrest enveloping far too much of the world, a courageous but honest assessment of our own lives — any one of those things is all it takes to know that the story John tells is trustworthy. Because the light is there. We can see it. But so too can we see everything that threatens it.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

A number of years ago I was trying to teach a seminary intern about the importance of accompanying people through grief. About sitting with them when life just felt too hard for any reason imaginable or unimaginable. His heart was in the right place, but he just wanted to fix everything. He wanted to be like that tree in Kansas City. He wanted to bring so much light, the darkness would have no chance but to fall away. He thought if you just had enough reason for joy, then you could forget your sorrow. We talked about it until I had used up every word I had, and I still hadn't gotten through.

I finally resorted to desperate measures. We went into the basement of the church, where there were no windows, and we sat in the darkness. Once his eyes had adjusted, I stood across the room, took a flashlight, aimed it directly in his eyes, and turned it on. He yelped and asked me what I was doing as he covered his eyes. "Let's try it one more time," I said. And we sat in the darkness again, and when his eyes had adjusted again, I turned the flashlight on again. But this time I did so standing next to him, and I aimed the flashlight just a few feet in front of him. "Oh," he said.

Sometimes, when we are in the midst of deep darkness, the most healing, helpful light is that which comes alongside of us in a measure we can handle. It is counter-intuitive to what we might want, but it honors what we need, and it meets us where we are, which is, I believe, the very definition of incarnation. The light that John tells us about, the light of the world that comes to us at Christmas — it is not a light that stands at a distance, harshly illuminating everything about us. It is a light that refuses distance, climbing into the darkest places with us, lighting a candle, and promising to stay with us, always.

And of course that candle is the same candle that appears in every room of John's house, and it is the same candle we lit today: the candle of love. That's what John has always wanted us to know: the light he keeps talking about will keep shining because it is fueled by nothing less than the love of God. And that love of God does not give up. It does not let go. I say it each week as part of the benediction: "It is the love of God that gathers us into this time and place together, and it is the same love of God that sends us out." It is the love of God that brought us into this world, and it is the love of God that will be with us when we leave this world. It is the love of God that began this world, and it is the love of God that will remain with this world —

which means not for one second, not for one fraction of a second, will the love of God ever leave you. It stays alongside of us, and it shines just enough light that we can keep going, no matter what else is going on around us. It leads us forward, always, one manageable step at a time.

That is Christmas at John's house — the celebration of a story that began before time, a story that will endure for all time: "a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."