

Sermon for December 31, 2023  
1 Christmas  
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney  
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church  
Los Alamos New Mexico

Isaiah 61:10-62:3  
Psalm 147  
Galatians 3:23-25;4:4-7  
John 1:1-18

Bless us O Lord who worship in this place.  
Grant that what we say with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our lives. In Christ's Holy name we pray. Amen.

I chose the version of the Gospel reading today from the New King James Version for a very specific reason. Look in your Pew Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, at the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 1-5. It reads:

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Now, if you look in the bulletin at the New King James Version, Verse 5 reads like this:

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. **4** In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. **5** And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

That penultimate word in verse 5 makes all the difference to me:  
“The darkness did not comprehend it,”

The Gospel of John begins with the same three words as Genesis: “In the beginning...”

For good reason: With the Gospel of John  
we see the creation anew, through the Word.  
And we begin to understand what John means  
when he writes of the “word”  
if we remember that the Greek word “logos”

means far more than the simplistic understanding of letters put together to form the symbolic expression of text.

Logos is the divine conversation,  
the cognitive relationship between human and divine,  
the reasoning, the comprehending, the relational grasp of concepts that mean more than mere words can express.

The logos is the light come into the world,  
and, as I said, I prefer the New King James' response  
of the darkness in finding the light incomprehensible.

There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John,  
who bore witness to the Light, a witness to those who came to hear John, who were called from  
the depths of their darkness.  
Even in this day when we all feel so enlightened, we still wander: We are the darkness, and we  
do not comprehend the light.

Just over a week ago we experienced the winter solstice,  
the longest night of the year.  
We stand here today on the last day of 2023.

2023 – a year when darkness seemed poised to overcome the light. And yet we continue to pray  
that God's Word – the Christ –  
will open us to the Light.

The Light is the one who brings the love of God into this world.

What we must comprehend is:  
love is what the power of God brings.  
Love is not what power gives.

This past Thursday was the feast of the Holy Innocents.  
In our Christian calendar we mark the day  
when Herod's army slaughtered all the male children  
under the age of two in the area of Bethlehem.

What kind of mind would consider such an act?  
But it happened before and it has happened since.

Thinking on that day,  
I recalled a study group in which we talked about  
all the violence in the Old Testament,  
and how Christianity had become so violent through the ages.

The questions were flying about how this could happen.

We read Isaiah's words: "I will not keep silent or rest until vindication and salvation shine out like a burning torch"

The group's response: "I think it's overdue."  
As I look back on this year, the continuing wars:  
Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Hamas;  
the dead and the dying throughout the world; violence and hatred are rampant,  
and words of hate seem to drown out pleas for peace.

And I pray: How long, O Lord, how long?

A slaughter of innocent blood that we see repeated age after age under the labels of genocide and ethnic cleansing.  
Slaughter upon slaughter.  
How long, O Lord, how long?

We desire justice.  
We demand justice.  
We ask that the voices of the innocent be heard.  
It's a voice, like the Scripture say, crying in the wilderness.

Isaiah wrote about that desire for justice  
and the coming of the light as the vindication of Jerusalem  
and the light of salvation.  
And Paul writing in Galatians foresees the light of Christ  
as the personification of faith.

Paul's talking all about the light  
being the coming of freedom and salvation.

"Now before faith came..." he writes,  
"we were bound by the law,  
but now we are freed as heirs of the promise  
of the inheritance of the Father's love."

Paul writes of the promise in the section  
that is left out of the reading today.  
In that section of the Letter to the Galatians, we hear:  
"in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

The reality is that in the light and love of Christ:  
"There is no longer Jew or Greek,

there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”  
And just as the chosen people are children of the promise,  
so “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.  
The promise is that we will not be forever surrounded by darkness. As our lives grow fuller into  
the light of Christ,  
we see more clearly and watch as the darkness diminishes,  
little by little.

Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest,  
talks about God loving the world so much,  
but that over the years we grew to fear God  
for all the wrath attributed to him in the Old Testament.  
God sent Christ into the world so that we might see  
the loving face of God in human form.

We experience that loving face each Christmas in the face of Jesus, born of the virgin Mary on  
that dark night so long ago.

And yet, that birth shines out over the centuries so that we,  
who wait in the darkness relight our own lives in the generous gift of the loving face of God.

Love is a gift. It is tangible. It is real.  
It is the word that was born of Mary  
and has spread to all the world.  
It is the gift we share with each other.  
The love of God for all God’s people.