

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
Second Sunday of Christmas: January 2, 2022
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe + "Putting Us In Our Place"

I know something about being put in one's place. I have been put in my place by pastor colleagues who come into our weekly text studies seeming to know all the smart answers while I am still struggling for meaning. I was put in my place by the matriarch of my first congregation, who once spent 45 minutes in my office accusing me of being a perfectionist. (She was right, by the way.)

I was put into my place in my little isolation room when I realized I'd have to miss our Christmas Eve services. I was further put into my place that same night when I ventured across town to pick up curbside takeout so Bill could have a special Christmas Eve meal, and had a near miss crossing 309 that easily could have been catastrophic. Lying awake later that night I imagined the terrible headline, and then your first reaction: "What was my pastor doing driving around while she was sick?" Bill had said "Let's just have frozen pizza" and, as usual, he was right.

I think that being put in one's place is why the beginning of Job Chapter 38 touches a deep chord in me. After chapters of protest, lament, and attempts at justification by Job and his so-called friends, God finally thunders at job out of whirlwind: "Where were YOU when I laid the foundations of the earth?" God continues in this vein for two hair-raising chapters, after which Job finally acknowledges God's infinite power and the limitations of human knowledge.

The first three words of John's Gospel put us in our place, our place as a little speck in the continuum of creation. "In the beginning" does not take us to the beginning. It takes us before the beginning. Because only from there can the beginning take place. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" We were nowhere. No place. There was not yet even a whiff of dust out of which the first human would be formed. In light of this, any pedestal you might be tempted to put yourself on quickly crumbles.

But then, John 1 goes on to tells us, came that blinding moment of creation. The Word that was with God and the Word that was God erupted out of God's own heart, a seismic impulse of love that penetrated the darkness at the speed of light, because it was light. And then we get in verse 5 what sounds like great good news: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Light wins. Darkness loses. Story over? Case closed? Not so fast. If we get out our magnifying glass on verse 5, we find that a closer translation reads: "The line shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not comprehended it." This tells us what we already know: The story is not over. The darkness is still real. It's still a player. It is refusing to understand the light. It's refusing to engage with it.

Verses 10 and 11 seem to suggest this means people are refusing to accept the light of Jesus' ministry: ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But I think the darkness' refusal to comprehend the light is more sinister. Currents are sweeping across our culture, our nation, across the globe that are ignoring the light, denying its presence, refusing to engage with it -- if we think of that light as the expression of God's love and passionate concern for the well-being of creation and everything in it.

It's not just a failure to understand, it's an outright rejection. Fossil fuel proponents are digging in even as the climate is going completely wacky. Hard lines of resistance to vaccines and even to testing are being set in stone. Repressive dictatorships are overwhelming democracies largely because reason is being sideswiped by locomotives of disinformation on social media. Even our own democracy hangs in the balance as states are quickly passing laws making it harder for Americans to vote. How can it be against the law to provide water to someone standing in line to vote? These are forces of death, not of life. The specter of death has become our constant companion.

Why am I going down this dark road on the last Sunday of Christmas? Because only when we acknowledge the darkness and its foothold in our world can we celebrate Christmas authentically. Only when we acknowledge that the world has been lost to sin can we grasp what means when we sing "Christ is born today!" or "Christ was born for this!" or "Christ was born to save!"

To save us from what? From the darkness winning. Only the Word that was God, the Word that is God, and the Word that became God in the flesh can accomplish that. Only when the darkness puts us squarely in our place, only when we fall to our knees at the manger, can we confess that we are otherwise utterly lost. Only then can we embrace the magnitude of God's great act of that literally saves our lives: FOR YOU this day in the city of David is born a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord!

We don't know what lies ahead, but this could be a Christmas that we will long remember. That same Christmas Eve as I lay in my isolation room, we lost to death one of our oldest, longest, dearest members. Death is all around us. There is nothing wrong with finding comfort in our cozy Christmas rituals, but do not let them become the entire story. The human experience of Christmas begins as we come in out of the darkness, kneel at the manger in the rich glow of light that is God's love, and then carry that light back out into the darkness. The darkness will still refuse to comprehend, but every additional pinprick of light testifies that the light is, in fact, winning. Every pinprick of light announces the angel's good news all over again: "Behold, all you who live in darkness and the shadow of death! Behold, I bring you great joy!"

How do you become a pinprick of light? By becoming yourself an expression, in any way that feels natural, of God's love and passionate concern for the well-being of creation and everything in it. As John tells us, the light shines ON. YOU are that light!

Christmas does not beam us up out of the hard realities in which we live, it plunges us deeply into them. Let us, like the shepherds, receive the good news with glad and joyful hearts, and then like them go and tell the world what we know to be true. Amen.