

*Monday, December 20*

December seems to be the fastest month of the year. We barely get into the month and all of a sudden, it's over and it's the New Year. So as we head into the home stretch of Christmas this week, let's take a quieter moment, and remember why we have this season.

I know for many this season is the financial salvation of the businesses that undergird so much of our economy. For many children, it is still the most wonderful time of the year, with surprises and amazing gifts that were unthinkable years ago.

Yet for many others among us, the Christmas season is a time where we remember our losses. Some of us remember close family members that died. Some of us remember with horror as children we watched our parents drink away the season. For many of us, we cannot face December without dread and anxiety. Many of us don't even know why we have such mixed emotions during this month, because there are happy moments around Christmas mixed in with those unhappy, chaotic moments from our childhood that we could not control.

Whether your Christmas colours are red and green or whether they are mostly blue, the reality is we can choose to take responsibility for how we experience our Christmas, and our Advent, the whole Christmas season. The first choice we have at Christmas time, as well as during the rest of the year, is the choice to be honest about what we are feeling, what we have grown up with, what is currently going on in hearts and minds. This may be the most difficult thing we face at Christmas: the courage to be honest.

Yet when we are honest and know what's going on inside us during this season, good, bad and indifferent; this is the time that God can meet us. And after all, the main message of this season is the fact that God became one of us, and moved in to our neighborhood. It's a happy time when we have a newborn among us, but even more than that, it is an amazing time when we encounter the Living God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

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So let's take time enough, enough moments apart from some of the rushed and worrisome things we do this time of year, and consider what is going on in our hearts and minds. Now is the time to share with your good friend, with your trusted loved one what is happening inside you at Christmas. For this is where the holiday is really taking place. And it is a sacred moment when we let another human being inside our heart and mind.

Also, when we confront the internal reality of Christmas, then we have the freedom to experience the historical reality of the God who gave himself for us in this very special way. I hope you make the time this week for us to spend some time together considering the great news of what Christmas is all about. Let's end with the first part of the first chapter of the gospel of John, in the Message translation:

<sup>1-2</sup> The Word was first,  
the Word present to God,  
God present to the Word.  
The Word was God,  
in readiness for God from day one.

<sup>3-5</sup> Everything was created through him;  
nothing—not one thing!—  
came into being without him.  
What came into existence was Life,  
and the Life was Light to live by.  
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;  
the darkness couldn't put it out.

<sup>6-8</sup> There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

<sup>9-13</sup> The Life-Light was the real thing:  
Every person entering Life  
he brings into Light.  
He was in the world,  
the world was there through him,

and yet the world didn't even notice.  
He came to his own people,  
but they didn't want him.  
But whoever did want him,  
who believed he was who he claimed  
and would do what he said,  
He made to be their true selves,  
their child-of-God selves.  
These are the God-begotten,  
not blood-begotten,  
not flesh-begotten,  
not sex-begotten.

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.

Let us pray.

*Tuesday, December 21*

Today is the shortest day of the year, in terms of the light. So it is good to enjoy the light while we have it. This is true not only of the sunshine but also the Life-light, the Son of God shine. We're taking a few moments this week to consider the various responses we have to Christmas, good, bad and indifferent.

Every light in this life is a pale reflection of the one true Life-light that created the light in the first place. The Creator knew and knows that we need light to survive. We need it physiologically. We need it emotionally. We need it just to be able to physically see and perceive. We need the light. We are made for light, pre-programmed, if you will, to take in the light, to operate clearly only where light is. When we prefer the dark, we prefer not seeing, not perceiving, not hearing. God knew that we were not designed for

24 hour light, so we have a mixed 24 hour period in the winter here of 16 hours of darkness and 8 hours of light, and 8 hours of darkness and 16 hours of light in the summer. God knew we needed a break from the physical light. Scientists today sometimes refer to light pollution as the fact that with the advent of artificial light, it is becoming more difficult to have a rest from the light. We can hardly escape the light, at least in the cities where most of the population dwells.

But we never can get enough light from the Life light, the Word of God. This is the Word who became one of us, and moved into the neighborhood. This is the light that helps dispel confusion and misinformation. Just like when we come into a dark room, this is the light that helps us not bump into the obstacles by which we would hurt ourselves, hitting unseen objects, unless the light is turned on.

This light tells us that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This light reminds us that there is more to life than what we see with our physical eyes. This Word of God light is the one every Christmas directs us to observe. The life-giving light is the one that every celestial object causes us to reflect upon.

The star at Christmas and Epiphany is just a pointer, a fantastic one. And so we look up again with wonder.

But some of us just wonder. Because we have conflicting memories about this season, we're not sure how to respond to it. So we grieve losses, we fear anxious moments because we have been hurt in the past, we wonder if we are safe, because we grew up, some of us, in an environment that wasn't as safe as we hoped. So we have mixed feelings at this time of year. And this is not because of the light. This is because of others who sinned against us.

And that is why Jesus came. He came to bring us peace within, and peace with God. We cannot achieve this alone. We cannot even meditate ourselves into this space. But we can depend upon the community of recovering people, the community of faith and trust that there are others out

there who want to help, who want to listen. It's hard to see the light, when we are cowering in fear.

But God moves into the neighborhood, puts his arm around us and says it will be okay. Let's listen again to John chapter 1, in the NIV version:

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome<sup>[a]</sup> it.

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—  
<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Let us pray.

*Wednesday, December 22*

We've been speaking this week about the Christmas season and how many of us have mixed reactions to that season. Sometimes we are wrapped up in the joy, and peace and love and hope of Advent and Christmas. Sometimes, however, we have difficult memories during this time, so we do not experience the season with anything like joy, peace, hope or love. We

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experience the season with anxiety and fear and trepidation. Whatever comes into our hearts and minds, we must allow these feelings and thoughts to come; for so many of us have had to deny the hurt and pain of the past. But if we are indeed to receive the healing we need that can come in this season, we must allow the reality of our lives to come to the fore. This is rarely easy and usually requires courage.

I suppose we could say that it takes courage to face the darkness. It is a dark time of year. It is a fact that many people reject the Christian message. In most of our schools the Bible message is not allowed. We can talk about Rudolph with the funny nose, the magical Frosty that somehow comes to life and about the Grinch, whether played by a Canadian actor or not, but talking about Jesus is disallowed in many circles today. This is strange, particularly for those who remember not all that long ago where the Christian Christmas message was not only politically correct, but expected.

Today we live in a darker time of history, where it appears to be more acceptable to reject the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. This is God who became human and moved into the neighborhood. It is unclear whether the babe that came so long ago would be welcomed into today's Canada and even this city. Call me and tell me if I am wrong.

The darkness is a place where very little is considered wrong, where bumping into unknown objects is common, and where lots of people get hurt. There are jokes about coming over to the Dark Side, probably in light of the Star Wars series of long ago. One bumper sticker reads: Come over to the Dark Side, we have cookies. Apparently there is a web site where you can find all kinds of bumper stickers like this. There happened to be a follow up bumper sticker that reads: Now that you have come over to the Dark side, are you surprised that we lied about the cookies?

The darkness is a place where lying and deception are common. The darkness is a place of confusion and groping, because we were designed for the light. Our eyes can adjust to the very low light, but in the absence of light we have very little if anything to guide us. And we were built for guidance, not complete independence. Now as we mature we need a level of independence, but also part of that maturity is finding our place in our

communities. Without that place, all we have is isolation and nowhere to share our gifts and abilities. We were designed to share, not hoard.

And so as we get back to enjoying the light, and not seeking the darkness, as we choose to agree with God, and God's ways in our lives, we choose life and hope and love. As we bring all our realities to the light, God helps us to deal with them and becomes a resource and life giver rather than an opponent. We'll explore how God does this in our next time together.

Let's read John 1, again in a different translation (The Amplified Version):

<sup>1</sup>IN THE beginning [before all time] was the Word (<sup>[a]</sup>Christ), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God <sup>[b]</sup>Himself. <sup>(A)</sup>

<sup>2</sup>He was present originally with God.

<sup>3</sup>All things were made and came into existence through Him; and without Him was not even one thing made that has come into being.

<sup>4</sup>In Him was Life, and the Life was the Light of men.

<sup>5</sup>And the Light shines on in the darkness, for the darkness has never overpowered it [put it out or absorbed it or appropriated it, and is unreceptive to it].

<sup>6</sup>There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>(B)</sup>

<sup>7</sup>This man came to witness, that he might testify of the Light, that all men might believe in it [adhere to it, trust it, and rely upon it] through him.

<sup>8</sup>He was not the Light himself, but came that he might bear witness regarding the Light.

<sup>9</sup>There it was--the true Light [was then] coming into the world [the genuine, perfect, steadfast Light] that illumines every person. <sup>(C)</sup>

<sup>10</sup>He came into the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him [did not know Him].

<sup>11</sup>He came to that which belonged to Him [to His own--His domain, creation, things, world], and they who were His own did not receive Him and did not welcome Him.

<sup>12</sup>But to as many as did receive and welcome Him, He gave the authority (power, privilege, right) to become the children of God, that is, to those who believe in (adhere to, trust in, and rely on) His name--<sup>(D)</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Who owe their birth neither to <sup>[c]</sup>bloods nor to the will of the flesh [that of physical impulse] nor to the will of man [that of a natural father], but to God. [They are born of God!]

<sup>14</sup>And the Word (Christ) became flesh (human, incarnate) and tabernacled (fixed His tent of flesh, lived awhile) among us; and we [actually] saw His glory (His honor, His majesty), such glory as an only begotten son receives from his father, full of grace (favor, loving-kindness) and truth.

Let us pray.

*Thursday, December 23*

All spiritual paths begin in need. All life begins in a messy, needy way. This is true of plants. This is true of animals. This is true of babies, of us. So it is not a surprise that the apostle John wrote that what happens to us when we say “yes” to God is a kind of re-birth, being “born again.” Now many today use this latter phrase to refer only to fundamentalists and radicals. But every Christian person comes into the faith the same way, through a simply “yes” to God, a “no” to sin and rebellion against God and that is the new birth.

But before that birth can happen, something else must happen. It is the acknowledgement of our need. If saying “yes” to God is the birth, then acknowledging our need is the conception. It is step 1. Theologically, it is saying to God, to others and to ourselves, I am a sinner in need of what God can give me, that I cannot give myself. Psychologically, it is acknowledging the fact that there is much in my past that makes me who I am, that I cannot change, but whatever is holding me back from growing up as a believer, I can bring that to God and God can transform me from within.

Our work is being honest. Being honest can be hard work. For those of us that grew up telling lies because if we told the truth, we would be beat up, it is especially hard work. “Honesty is the best policy,” the teacher used to write on the blackboard. But you knew that if you told the truth, you would be slapped down or punched or strapped. At home, it might be a family member who would hold you down and tickle you until you cried. That was almost worse than being beat up at school.

So honesty became problematic. Yet it is the only way to stay in contact with the real world and with our desperate need for community and love. Christmas was particularly hard for some of us. We remember our father's outbursts over silly things, like where the decorations go on the tree or around the house. We remember fearing angry outbursts at the table over food or verbally violent disagreements. This made Christmas a time to fear rather than a time to love.

And where was God with that little boy or little girl in their fear and anxiety? I believe Jesus was there weeping with that little boy or girl. He had his arms around them, so they made it through the ordeal of Christmas. He loved them and tried to tell them how much he loved them, even though the family that was supposed to be safe was so broken and chaotic.

There were those when Jesus was a baby who wanted to kill him. He hadn't understood this, but he probably was able to pick up on his mother and foster father's anxiety, as they moved from Israel to Egypt. Children are pretty sensitive this way. We don't know when Jesus lost his foster father Joseph. We just know the Scriptures are strangely silent about him after Jesus' bar mitzvah.

Jesus, as God become human, knows what we grow through. I believe he is with those who suffer abuse and harm, sickness and terror. And yes, sometimes this comes through the church, but also from many other venues. The key is simple honesty and sharing with someone you trust. This is what I went through. Because if we do not process it in this way, we process it in another way, often through alcohol, drugs, sex, food addictions and many other ways of escape, ways of denying the pain that is real.

It seems there are only a few specialized small groups where we can honestly deal with these difficulties, the 12 step groups, and professional counseling and psychiatric help. But at least these exist. But wouldn't it be wonderful if our families, our churches, our social communities, our political communities, our groups of all kinds, if they could listen and help rather than join in the denial of these problems, at the most basic of levels. And to be fair, sometimes they do, albeit rarely.

Jesus comes to help us in our brokenness, in our need. That's the Christmas message. Many of us find it hard to hear. Perhaps those of us who can hear the message can help those who can't by listening to them.

Let us hear the John 1 passage again in the New Living Translation:

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

<sup>2</sup> He existed in the beginning with God.

<sup>3</sup> God created everything through him,  
and nothing was created except through him.

<sup>4</sup> The Word gave life to everything that was created,<sup>[a]</sup>  
and his life brought light to everyone.

<sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness can never extinguish it.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>6</sup> God sent a man, John the Baptist,<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>7</sup> to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. <sup>8</sup> John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. <sup>9</sup> The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup> They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

<sup>14</sup> So the Word became human<sup>[d]</sup> and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.<sup>[e]</sup> And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

Let us pray.

*Friday, December 24*

Today's the last day of anticipation. It is the eve. It is a chance for great expectation, except perhaps for those of us who don't have time to anticipate. We merely get through the holiday and experience some measure of relief or added stress on the day of Christmas.

Did you hear the interview on CBC with the blogger from New York who says that she realizes in this world of instant gratification, there is no longer any sense of waiting. Instant shopping on the internet, instant access to movies and TV programs, instant food stuffs of all kinds, the hot ones ready in seconds... You don't have to wait to be a star, you can go on reality TV and whether you are talented or not, if the audience likes you, that's enough. So why spends years practicing your musical instrument or vocal skills, when you can just be a celebrity without much cost. This blogger says her children are growing up to expect everything immediately, and that something is wrong if they don't have it NOW.

Something is wrong. We have lost any sense of what it means to mature or to grow in godly character. It used to be that we were taught delaying gratification was a major indicator of maturity and self-control, that would allow you to have some measure of achieving your planned goals and highest dreams, rather than just TV and computer games, which give the immediate and relentless small measure of satisfaction.

Years ago, a psychologist "tested" four year olds with a marshmallow. He said that they could have the marshmallow now, or if they waited until after he came back from an errand in 15 minutes, they could have two marshmallows. Almost all of them said they would wait, left alone in the room with the marshmallow, but only 20% waited the 15 minutes to receive

the second one. All the rest waited seconds or minutes before they ate the marshmallow. Later, in follow-up studies of these children, they also found out that those able to wait 2, or 10 or 15 minutes were the ones in high school with the highest achievement scores and greatest success. Apparently this is about being able to wait, being able to concentrate on a goal, being able to look forward and enjoy the anticipation (whether by creative distraction or other means). Anticipation is sometimes the best part of the experience, whether it is a family dinner, a holiday, a graduation, a relationship encounter or a reunion of some kind.

As we anticipate Christmas, may we remember the whole reason for the holiday in the person of Jesus Christ. It is relationship with Jesus that brings the holiness of the holiday into proper perspective.

May we make sure in what we do today and tomorrow (as well as every day of the year), that Jesus is the center, the hope, peace, joy and love we all so desperately need.

Let us end again with the John 1 passage, as we have all week, today from the New King James:

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

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name *was* John. <sup>7</sup> This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. <sup>8</sup> He was not that Light, but *was sent* to bear witness of that Light. <sup>9</sup> That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup> He came to His own,<sup>[c]</sup> and His own<sup>[d]</sup> did not receive Him. <sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Merry Christmas, I'm Dr. Jonathan Dent, Minister at St. David's Presbyterian Church. If you've missed any of this week's Meditations, please go to our web site at [www.stdavids.nf.ca](http://www.stdavids.nf.ca). God bless.

Let us pray.