

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Dec. 26, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE LIGHT THAT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS"

Matthew 2:13-23; John 1:5

Christmas is a wonderful time of year in so many ways, and I hope you all had a grand Christmas day. But there is an inevitable let-down on the day after Christmas. Reality sets in. We realize that we ate too much. Or spent too much.

There's a song called, "I Wish It Could Be Christmas All Year Long." Honestly, we probably couldn't stand that. But thankfully once a year Christmas comes with all its traditions and helps us celebrate the birth of our Saviour. And those traditions include the lights of Christmas. Did you see the recent cartoon in the Mississauga News? A man is hanging Christmas lights on the house but only one light in the string is burning. His wife asks him, "Why only one light this year?" He replies, "Have you seen the hydro bills lately?" I hope hydro bills don't force us to get rid of all Christmas lights. For the lights of Christmas point to Him who is the everlasting light. John writes in chapter 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." And he's speaking of the One whose birth we've celebrated. Jesus Christ is the light who shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome him.

On this day after Christmas, we remember that Jesus Christ was born into a dark world. Matthew 2:13-23, "After the wise men had left... an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, 'Get up and flee with Mary and the child to Egypt, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.' And Joseph, obedient as always to God, did so and they stayed there until Herod had died. Already the darkness, represented by Herod, was trying to overcome the light. And Herod became furious when he realized that he had been tricked by the wise men. So he had all the tiny children in and around Bethlehem destroyed. Such a dark act was quite in character for Herod who even had his own sons and wives killed, when he thought they were a threat to his rule. If God had not warned Joseph, Jesus would have been numbered among Herod's victims. But at least for now, the darkness did not overcome him. And when Joseph returned home with Mary and Jesus, he went to Galilee rather than to Judea where Herod's cruel son Archelaus was ruling. Thankfully his rule over Judea was brief. But Herod and Archelaus only added to the darkness of the world into which Jesus was born.

Now it wasn't all darkness. The Pax Romana brought years of peace and stability to the known world, though it was often brutally enforced and had many underlying problems led to Rome's decline. There were always quietly faithful people like Mary and Joseph who listened to God and obeyed him. People like these were light in their communities and the world. Israel had been called by God to be a light in the dark world, and sometimes they were, though they sometimes squandered their calling. This was especially true for the spiritual leaders, who were more concerned with maintaining their position than in faithfully leading Israel. So when Jesus was born there was darkness, even in Israel.

And if Jesus were born today we would say that he was born in a dark world. Even in this season of light we are reminded that this world is not as it should be. I read about a person who quietly and anonymously put \$1,600 in gold coins in a Salvation Army Kettle. Unfortunately the local Salvation Army began getting phone calls about the gold coins. Turns out they were stolen, and the thief had dropped them in the kettle to get rid of them.

Then there was the man who was driving home from work on Christmas Eve and saw a young boy fall through the ice on a pond. The man stopped, jumped out, tore off his jacket and crawled out onto the ice. He managed somehow to save the drowning boy. Happy ending, right? Well not quite. The man discovered that while he was risking his life saving the boy, someone in the crowd of onlookers stole his jacket and the envelope containing his Christmas bonus.

Even in this season we cannot escape the world's darkness. We know about the wars that never seem to end, the threat of terrorism, the hunger which persists in the midst of abundance, the greed which undermines our economy, the oppressive rulers in various parts of the world. On this day many churches remember Herod's slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem and bring it up-to-date with this prayer, "O God, receive...into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Many people suffer from the darkness of loneliness or depression or unemployment or lack of direction. They see no light at the end of the tunnel. The darkness called sin somehow gets into each one of us. And one day each of us will be engulfed by the darkness of death. Death happens even in this season and we feel it's sting whether it's the death of a 2 day old infant or the death of a 90 year old after a full life. Yes, there is darkness in the world.

But says John, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not

overcome it.” (John 1:5) And that God given light is Jesus Christ. Of course, many people did not comprehend the light while he was with them. A few did. But Israel’s spiritual leaders never really got it. They saw Jesus as a blasphemer and a threat. And on a Friday in Jerusalem when the sky turned black, they finally did what Herod had tried to do years before. In conjunction with the Romans they put Jesus to death on a Cross. They wiped their hands and said, “Well, that’s the end of him.” They thought that he had been extinguished and put away for good. But God raised him from the grave on the third day. Jesus Christ is the light who shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome him. Oh, the darkness still tries to overcome Christ, but no matter how hard it tries, it will never succeed. The powers of darkness have been decisively defeated. Jesus Christ lives and reigns forevermore.

Yes, Jesus Christ brings to light the sin of the world and shines into all the dark and shadowy corners of our lives. But he does this, not to condemn the world and us, but rather to save us and to direct our footsteps in God’s way.

People who take a tour of the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky report that as the group reaches the bottom of the cave, the tour guide turns out the lights one by one until there is no light at all. In that huge cave people experience total darkness. They feel disoriented, not being able to see their hands in front of them, losing their sense of balance and direction. Then the tour guide says, “Now what would happen if we had a power failure and we couldn’t turn the lights back on? How would we get out? Let me show you,” he says. He takes a single match and lights it. The light of that one match fills the large cave, and provides enough light for all the tourists to follow the narrow path back to the surface.

The light of Christ that shines for you and for me and for the whole world is a transforming light, a comforting light, a light of forgiveness, grace, and hope. “I am the light of the world,” he says, “whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.” When we follow Jesus, He leads us forward in the paths of justice and righteousness, peace and sharing. He shows us what it means to love sacrificially. The more we focus on the light that is Jesus Christ, the more we begin to reflect his light in our actions, our words, our thoughts, our priorities. And in the hour of death he will bring you and me and all God’s children safely to the Father’s house. Jesus Christ shines with the light of eternal life.

The light that is Jesus Christ shines today in and through people who respond to his call. Let me end with a few stories that reflect the light of Christ.

Did you see the story on TV the other day about Conrad, an eight year old

from the Barrie area? He wanted the money that would be otherwise be spent on his Christmas gifts to be spent helping the needy in downtown Toronto. Apparently he got the idea last fall when on a visit to Toronto he shared his sandwich with a homeless man. And with his gift money and a donation from Subway Conrad gave away warm clothes and sandwiches to men standing outside the Salvation Army in Toronto last Wednesday. The light shines in the darkness.

Here's a story about the penitent thief who hung on the Cross beside Jesus. It a legend but it may be based on fact. The thief's name was Dismas and he did not meet Jesus for the first time when they both hung on their crosses on Calvary. The story says that when Joseph and Mary were fleeing to Egypt, they were met by robbers, including Dismas who wanted to kill them and steal the wise men's gifts. But something about the baby touched the heart of Dismas. He refused to let harm come to Jesus or his parents. He looked at Jesus and said, "O most blessed of children, if there ever comes a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour." So Jesus and Dismas met again at Calvary, and Dismas on the Cross found forgiveness and mercy for his soul. Even as an infant, a godly light shone in Jesus, transforming hearts and minds.

The final story is told by United States Senator John McCain. When he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam McCain was forced to kneel for hours at a time, his arms tied behind him. But one guard, as he began his daily shift silently approached McCain and loosened the ropes. As his shift ended he would tighten them again. Weeks later, when McCain was allowed to stand outside in the sunshine on Christmas Day, the same guard approached him, stood silently and drew a cross in the dirt with his sandal. He then erased it and walked away. "I'll never forget that individual," McCain said. "What he did saved my life."

Jesus Christ is the light who shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome him. All other lights eventually flicker and die. At the end there will be only one. But it will be enough, for the darker it becomes the more brightly the light of Christ shines. And one day we will walk by this light in the heavenly Jerusalem. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." And it never will.