

Light and Life
John 1:1-5, 10-14

First Sunday of Christmas/ 29th December 2019

The lectionary reading for this first Sunday of Christmas or Christmastide is Jesus' flight into Egypt in Matthew 2, followed by Herod's fury that the magi tricked him, which resulted in the killing of every boy under two years of age, remembered as the "holy innocents" (Mt. 2:12-23). In Western churches, the Feast of the Holy Innocents is on the fourth day of Christmas, December 28, and, today, December 29 in Orthodox Churches. It's a disturbing text, reminding us that the birth of Jesus generates an enormous amount of resistance. It reminds of the cost involved in sending the Son into the world. The coming of the light increases darkness. It reminds us that sometimes we don't want to be servants of the light or bear witness to the light or even encounter the light. We prefer darkness. And this is a dark story.

And that's the primary reason why I decided *not* to preach on the Matthew text today. I've never preached on this text. I thought about taking it on this year, but something in me was pushing against this idea. Yes, it's a story that needs to be told. There was a very moving op-ed piece in *The New York Times* on Friday by [Esau McCaulley](#), an Anglican priest. There's something about this story speaks to where we are these days as a nation. It's a reminder McCaulley writes, "that we live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent on the altar of power,...it's a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children,...the story of the innocents calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate."¹ This is why, McCaulley makes clear, "The very telling of the Christmas story is an act of resistance." We don't often think of the Christmas story in this way, we have tamed and domesticated the story and radical implications of Christ's birth. But it is an act of resistance against the powers that be that continue to thwart God's justice and love and peace in the world.

That's why I decided not to preach on Matthew 2 this morning. I couldn't handle it. These are difficult and divisive times, people are scared and anxious. Everything seems to be unraveling all around us. That's why I felt drawn to John 1, to the life and light of God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, we cannot avoid the darkness of the age and the suffering occurring at the hands of the superrich and powerful. But we also need to sit with the light of Christ for a season. We need light. Stars. We need epiphanies. We don't exactly know when Christ was born. But for the first Christians, his birth was the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16) giving new light to the world. The celebration of his birth was placed near the darkest time of the year (in the Northern hemisphere). Now, while it is not historically true to say Jesus was born on December 25, it's *symbolically* true. The early Church had a brilliant idea to place the birth of Jesus around this time of year, near the winter solstice, when, as the ancients believed, a new sun was born. The Church, around 350, formally placed Jesus' birth near the longest night of the year (north of the Equator), among days associated with two Roman solar festivals.

On Wednesday, we celebrated the birth of Christ our light. On Christmas Eve, relying on the light coming from the Christ Candle, I read John 1 in the dark. We heard, "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” (John 1:4-5). In his carol “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” Charles Wesley (1707-1778) beautifully captured this image: “Light and life to all he brings/ risen with healing in his wings.”²

Light. Light as source of life. Christ’s life as light. Light that allows us to see and be seen. Life and light, surrounding us and filling us. If you think of it, right now, we are being bathed in light. We are *in* the light. The light from the sun allows us to see, but as we see, and *right now*, we are also in light. As the psalmist said, “In your light,” O God, “we see light” (Psalm 36:9). We are *in* the light of God. And the light of God (1 Jn. 1:5), this life, this presence of God—*shines!*

The seventeenth-century Dutch painter, Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656), painted many biblical scenes. His nickname was Gherado della notti, “Gerard of the night,” as he was known for painting night scenes containing artificial light. In his piece *Adoration of the Shepherds*, the infant Jesus literally shines. Jesus is the source of light in the painting, the light originates in him.

I love this piece because it’s a reminder that the light of Christ shines *in* the darkness! I take enormous comfort in knowing this. We’re so prone to think dualistically in terms of light vs. dark, of light casting away darkness. But that’s not John’s understanding here. That wasn’t his experience of the Risen Christ. Christ shows us that the light shines *in* the darkness—which means darkness is never completely dark. There’s something of God’s light and life present even in the darkest moments of our lives. And the good news is that the light of Christ shines in the darkest times and the darkness hasn’t power to overcome it. Christ is *Solus Invictus*: Unconquered Light.

So, while it might not be historically true to say that Jesus was born on December 25, it’s definitely true at a deeper level, symbolically, theologically, psychologically, it’s true experientially that the light of Christ shines even in the darkest days and the darkness, in the end, has no power over the light, for the light of Christ cannot be defeated. And, we could say, with Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)—who died on this day in 1894—that in the bleak midwinter Christ’s light shines all the brighter.³

Rossetti’s midwinter should not be taken literally. It, too, is a symbol, a metaphor for an *interior* midwinter, a life filled with short days, longing for light, longing for life. She’s waiting for something new to be born in her, the birth of new life in the frozen places of her heart. Rossetti once wrote, “What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me through, instead of this heart of stone, ice-cold whatever I do! What would I give for tears! Not smiles but scalding tears, to wash the black mark clean, and to thaw the frost of years...”⁴ She’s waiting for a thaw, for the warmth of fire, the warmth of life. She’s waiting for light to be born again in her, to bring her into a new day, a new life, a new world. She hopes, like we all do, to be able to give the warmth of our hearts—heart of flesh, pumping with blood and life and passion—to Christ, the Christ whose light was born in Bethlehem and still shines brightly in the world, and maybe all the more brightly in the dark places of our lives and our world.

This is the good news of Christmas! God's light has come into the world. To tell this story—to affirm it, to live it—is always an act of resistance against the powers that be. As we move into the new year, may we seek after that light and walk in the light of the Lord (Is 2:5). Amen.

¹Esau McCaulley, “The Bloody Fourth Day of Christmas,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/opinion/christmas-feast-of-innocents.html>.

² First included in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739).

³ Rosetti's poem “A Christmas Carol” was first published in the January 1872 issue of *Scribner's Monthly*. The poem was later set to music by Gustav Holst (1874-1934) and given the name “In the Bleak Midwinter.” The carol was included in *The English Hymnal*, published in 1906.

⁴ Cited by Jan Marsh, *Christina Rosetti: A Literary Biography* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2012), 24.