The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Hello everyone! And welcome to our final Advent Holden Evening Prayer worship service for 2020. Thanks so much for joining us in worship during these cold and dark evenings - they are certainly a bright spot of light for many of us when things feel so overwhelming.

Our reading for this evening speaks to the relationship of darkness and light, and what better time to consider this holy reality than in this season of waiting, of shorter days and longer nights, of anticipating the light of Christ who is to come? Please join me in hearing the Word of God revealed to us in the first chapter of John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.
And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Oftentimes we hear of darkness as what is bad or harmful or destructive, the anti-goodness or anti-light in the world. But I can't go along with that assessment for all of darkness - if it were truly the bad and terrible thing it's so often portrayed as, then why is darkness a crucial part of God's creation? If God has called all of God's creation good, and darkness is certainly part of it, then we cannot call all of darkness bad or harmful, or needing to be cast away.

We encounter darkness every evening as the sun goes down and in the rhythm of God's good creation we are given tangible reminders of blessed rest, of slowing down, of paying closer attention and our deep need for sabbath. The seeds that sprout forth from the ground for new life, new creation, sustenance and beauty need the dark and rich nutrients of the soil to grow, keep rooted, and keep warm. The new lives growing in pregnancy are also nurtured in the life-giving darkness of the womb - an important reminder in this season of remembering and celebrating Mary's pregnancy with Jesus. Darkness is a place where God's goodness can certainly be praised.

Instead of the dismissal and negativity around darkness, what if we considered light and darkness as being the essential relationship of how we interact with the world? Of how we understand and see God? That we need both, and can embrace the nuance often absent from life's dichotomies?

I have often used light and darkness imagery to understand dealing with my mental health - that darkness is the anxiety and depression and shame and struggle and light is where I need to strive to be. But really, the two interact. It can't just be all light or all darkness. Sometimes it feels like it's all darkness, and that's when the reminder of Jesus as the light, that the light shines in the darkness, is all the more powerful for me. You can't have light without darkness, and you can't have darkness without light too. They are deeply related.

All light would be too bright - so bright it scares you, as what happened with the shepherds when they saw the star brighter than they could have possibly imagined when Jesus was born. Their first reaction to this great light was fear - fear in the light instead of their comfort and purpose tending their flocks by night, by darkness. It was only in the relationship of light and dark, of God coming to the shepherds in the angel's message, that dispelled their fear. Without the night sky, the star would not have come, but the light was fearful, and they were comforted by the darkness returning. They are deeply related.

In our Gospel reading this evening, and in the Holden liturgy too, perhaps the most famous part is about the darkness not overcoming the light. But even before we get to that part of the scripture, what do we learn about light? That what came into being was life. And that life was the light of all people. Life comes before the power of light. Not one thing came into being without him who is life. Life has both darkness and light, and trying to get rid of or cast one away does not give us the fullness or even the natural rhythm of life. Darkness and light are deeply related.

Yes, the light guides our path. The stars and moon shine in the dark sky to give us beauty and guidance. The sun gives us warmth and the power to grow and keeps our brains healthy. The light is still the life of all people. But we appreciate the light more when we know its relationship with darkness. Relationships matter, and even two things that are diametrically opposed still nurture the fullness of life. Connection dispels dichotomy. And it is in deep relationships, connections, first given to us by a loving God and God's beloved Son Jesus Christ, that these connections and relationships are possible. Praise God for the gift of knowing, of grace and truth, and God's love made human in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

As we continue to pray and worship, remembering our God of good creation in both darkness and light, how can you see darkness differently? In what ways does God show up and meet you, in times of darkness or light? Could a relationship between darkness and light help us to grow, to know more about the world and the people God created? I pray that as you ponder the darkness and the light, that you are filled with grace and truth, the grace and truth made real through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God with us, our Lord who is close to the Father's heart. May we all be comforted by that heart of God, made human in Christ Jesus, who is coming so very soon. Thanks be to God, Amen.