

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

What a poetic and needed reminder as we are in the midst of a rather dark time of year. We are here now in the middle or dead of winter, it's super cold, it's still pretty dark out, and most of our Christmas celebrating has ended. We're now into prime snowy season, where perhaps some of the original charm of the White Christmas has faded away, and we are looking forward to not having to deal with brushing off cars, running the snow blower at a godforsaken hour of the dark morning, and waiting for the plow trucks to come by yet again. Sometimes that darkness is internal too - seasonal affective disorder and depression and anxiety among many other mental health phenomena are super real, and often triggered in this dark time of year. Or maybe we continue to carry grief, for a loved one, for what Christmas used to be, for the things we've had to give up or people we've had to isolate from over the past nearly two years.

Darkness just feels different in this wintery time, a bit more final and all-encompassing, rather than a simple rest from the light of day.

Instead of seeing the darkness only as a burden, an undesirable state to be in, what if we saw darkness a little differently? What if we adjusted our view a little bit to see light more clearly in this dark season? What if darkness not only gives us the necessary time to fallow and rest, but also an appreciation of the smaller lights that shine the way for us?

Darkness, while challenging sometimes, is not inherently bad or something to be avoided. Darkness was the beginning, and light shone from that darkness to create the very beginning of God and Jesus and the created world as we know it.

This rhythm, cycle, connection of both light and dark is indeed what supports and creates and sustains life itself. We, including Jesus, are formed and grow in the warm, safe, darkness of our mothers' wombs, and after we are born, still need that safety and comfort to grow and flourish. We need the darkness of naptime and bedtime and the darkness of the day

to support our bodies throughout life. We also need the light, to help us and the earth around us grow, light to shine forth for the paths we are meant to follow, light for warmth and the joy of the sunrise and sunset.

It's remembering that light and dark work together, and that the light will always overcome the darkness we feel, that roots us in God's promises of light and hope, given to us by Christ Jesus. Light and dark determined creation from the very beginning, and indeed with God, continues to co-create within and around us too.

This Gospel story is the very beginning of the Gospel of John, and gives a different account of what Christ's arrival in the world looked and feels like. The presence of Christ creating a new world, a new reality, a new creation, looks different when we hear of Jesus as the Word, rather than only the Son of God. We know and recall the story of Mary and Joseph and the manger and the shepherds like we heard on Christmas Eve.

But this recollection of Jesus' arrival in the world goes into a deeper and more spiritual realm.

This prologue of John makes us certain that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus was part of creation from the very beginning. Indeed, the first sentences read more like the beginning of the creation story of Genesis rather than the birth narrative of Christmas, of the Nativity story.

There are certainly dark and fearful things surrounding the birth story of Christmas too - Joseph almost casting Mary away because of her pregnancy, the terror of the shepherds upon first seeing the angel of God, the need to flee from persecution by Herod when Jesus was just a baby. But yet, it is the light that shines in that darkness that guides the shepherds to Jesus, that Word from God which encourages Joseph to continue in the path of loving and marrying Mary, the message from God that encourages the little family to come back home once it is safe again. These Words from God are indeed Jesus himself - the power of life that God stirs within us when we are called to something that perhaps is fearful at first, but indeed does give us life in the end. The Word of God is Jesus himself, who became flesh and lived among us. And the word used for "lived" here is so

much more than just “lived” - it’s closer to an idea of pitching a tent, of dwelling, tabernacling, staying for a while and making yourself at home. And that’s how Jesus was in the world, dwelling among us humans, making his home here with us too, out of great love from God our heavenly Father.

Sometimes we need a trusted guide or friend to help us to see this light in the darkness, to see how Jesus shows up for us in the world. And that’s exactly what John, the Gospel writer, aims to do in his recollection of Jesus’ ministry. This prologue to the Gospel gives us the foundation for who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and why it is life-savingly important for us to know and pay attention to Him.

John clarifies that he himself is not the light, but instead followed God’s call to testify to the light, the actions and person of Jesus Christ. He uses his gift of spiritual storytelling to inspire thousands of generations with the spiritual truth of Christ Jesus. John is passionate about inspiring belief in Jesus Christ with this gospel, though for him, belief is more than just the spiritual or mental commitment. Belief throughout this story is about the actions, what someone does because of their spiritual callings and mental/emotional perspectives.

So friends, what if this understanding of light and dark, of Jesus being the light that shines in the darkness, could be a new beginning? A new way of seeing Jesus in our world, and knowing He is with us? A new creation for our life of faith?

Hearing the beginning of John’s Gospel at the beginning of this new year provides a life-giving foundation for how we can embrace this time. Instead of focusing on the darkness, let’s focus on where we find light even amidst the darkness. Let’s focus on embodying that Word of God, Jesus himself, in our thoughts, words, and deeds. This path of embodying our call to be followers of Christ will indeed lead us to that light, the life of all people.

Even if what is dark is outside of our control, there is still light to be found. People in the body of Christ who are determined to serve and help one another. The tiny sprouts of spring stubbornly persisting and growing

amidst the slushy snow. Hope for what is to come because of the promises of God.

You are not wrong or in danger for being in a dark season, dear friend. But I pray that you will see a little shimmer of light, a small glimmer of hope amidst the darkness. The moon is there even in the darkest nights of winter. The snow reflects the sparkly goodness of needed water in the world. The stars of the heavens, blessed and called good by God, have guided paths amidst the darkness for thousands of years.

Even if you are in a dark season, know that the light, Christ himself, has been with you from the very beginning, the very foundation of the world and indeed your life too. God rejoices in the life you have, and this rejoicing will carry you forward in any time and place.

May you have deep faith in Jesus, the light who is the life of all people, including you, dear friend. Jesus journeys with you, God loves you and holds you close, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, your faith will carry you through even the darkest of times. There is always light to be found, from the very beginning of creation and even now. May that light, Jesus Christ, shine forth, guide you, and give you peace, now and always. Thanks be to God, Amen.