

January 2, 2011

Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-14

TOWARD THE LIGHT

Do you like to read the comics in the paper? I have certain favorites: # 1 is Peanuts; then The Family Circus; Garfield; and one that is no longer in print – Calvin and Hobbes. I miss that little boy and his tiger.

One particular tool of the cartoonist is to draw a light bulb over someone's head when that particular character has a bright idea or finally "gets it." It is the artist's way of telling us, the readers, that the light has finally dawned, and that particular cartoon character is no longer muddle-headed.

Light. We just heard that word in the reading from John's Gospel. A beautiful passage from Isaiah 9 that is often read on Christmas Eve begins with these words: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined."

Light is a very potent theological concept. In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, there are 238 references to the word "light." This does not include other forms of the word such as lighted, lighten, lightens, etc.

From Genesis 1's "And God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light,'" to Revelation 22's "And night shall be no more, they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light," – in other words, from the beginning to the end of Holy Scripture – light is associated with the power of Almighty God.

In his Gospel, John uses the word "light" 22 times. "Light" and "Life" are two of the most crucial concepts in the 4th Gospel. The Evangelist calls Jesus "the light of all people." John the Baptist declares that his function was to point people to the light which was Jesus Christ. Our Lord calls Himself "the light of the world."

Psalm 27 begins, "The LORD is my light and my salvation." So, if Yahweh is our light, and Jesus says He is the light of the world, then Jesus is saying that He is God. There is no hinting around here in John's Gospel. He puts it right to us. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...In Him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

In the Bible, darkness is associated with chaos. Light is the opposite of darkness, and is the answer to chaos. William Barclay wrote: “(Jesus) is the one person who can save life from becoming a chaos. When Jesus dawns upon life, light comes.”

Perhaps we need to remember that darkness was a fearful thing to ancient peoples. There was no electricity; there were no street lights, and no automobiles with bright headlights. When the sun went down, it was **dark**. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face unless there was a bright moon in the sky. It is very easy to get lost in that kind of darkness.

John is telling us that Jesus, the light of the world, is our ray of hope in our darkness. With Him in our lives, we are able to see, where before we were blind. And when, in the light of Christ, we are able to see, then we have no need to fear the darkness because the dark is as light as day.

Ann Weems, in her book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, writes this poem.

Too often our answer to the darkness
is not running toward Bethlehem
but running away.
We ought to know by now that we can't see
where we're going in the dark.
Running away is rampant...
separation is stylish:
separation from mates, from friends, from self.
Run and tranquilize,
don't talk about it,
avoid.
Run away and join the army
of those who have already run away.
When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace
comes only when we turn and face the darkness?
Only then will we be able to see
the Light of the World.

Sometimes it's hard for us to turn toward the light because Jesus reveals things as they really are. In His light, phoniness, selfishness, and shallowness are exposed. Lying, cheating, and hurting others are uncovered.

But we can never be fully healed and restored until we allow the light of Jesus to shine in our lives and heal that which is broken.

John also assures us that the darkness has not been able to overcome the light. The Greek word that is translated “overcome, or extinguish, or put out” has three meanings.

One is that the darkness has never understood the light. In this sense we cannot understand Jesus until we submit to Him. The Greek word can also mean that the darkness was not able to pursue the light until it could overtake it, lay hold on it and overcome it. Not even the crucifixion could overcome Jesus.

The third meaning of the Greek word is that of extinguishing a fire or flame. Nothing could quench the light of Christ. He still shines in spite of the efforts of humanity to extinguish the flame. [Barclay]

The light of Jesus eliminates chaos, reveals things as they really are, and, third, the light which Jesus brings is a guiding light. Without Jesus to guide us, we don't know where we are going. Decisions are murky; the path is uncertain, like trying to drive on an unknown road in a blizzard's white out.

But in Jesus, the way we are to go is clear; we won't get lost on life's journey when we follow Him. As the words of our Anthem say: “Walk in the light, beautiful light, come where the dew-drops of mercy shine bright. Shine all around us by day and by night, Jesus, the Light of the world.”

Only Jesus is the true light that will enlighten all who come to Him. Only Jesus will chase away shadows of doubt about God. When we look at Jesus, we see God. Jesus also dissipates the fog of despair. In Him we have a new power that enables us to walk in His way. Impossible things become possible.

This past year has been very difficult for many people: the earthquake followed by the cholera epidemic in Haiti; the slaughter of Christians at worship in Iraq, and just yesterday in Egypt; death and serious illness of loved ones; continuing unemployment; roadblocks and hurdles seemingly arising daily. The darkness and chaos threaten to overwhelm us. We can either succumb to the darkness or turn toward the light. The choice is ours.

Finally, Jesus also abolishes the darkness of death. We no longer need to fear death, as others have done. In the resurrection of Jesus we now know that death is but the doorway through which we pass to something so wonderful it is indescribable.

As C. S. Lewis writes at the very end of the “Chronicles of Narnia” series of books, in book 7, “The Final Battle”:

‘Then Aslan turned to (the children) and said: “You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be.” Lucy said, “We’re so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.” “No fear of that,” said Aslan. “Have you not guessed?” Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose with them.’ [I’m going to skip the next 2 sentences so as not to spoil the ending.]

Aslan continues speaking. ““The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.” And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after.

But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.’

Those who receive Jesus receive power to become the children of God, children of the light. When you find yourself threatened by the chaos or darkness that swirls around you, turn toward the light. Walk in the light. Let the light of the world enlighten you; then go out into our dark, chaotic world and let Jesus light the world through you.

Let us pray. Almighty God, as we begin a new year, open our eyes so that we might see the light of the world, accept Him into our hearts, believe in His name, and receive His power to become Your children. Lord Jesus, the true and only light, banish our darkness. Deliver the dawn. Shine, Jesus, Shine Your light into our lives and into our world. Amen.