

### Advent 3: Redeeming Grace - LOVE

John 1: 1-18

The presence of God in human form is the "dawn" of redeeming grace, says the third verse of Silent Night. In John's gospel, we hear a similar theme, Jesus the light of God, came to be with us and his light dispels the world's darkness. Even more, that light came to show to all the love of God. Do you hear what this is saying? God so desired to be "up close and personal" with us that God came to earth to live, breathe, feel, teach, touch, and love us. God's light is among us. In this verse it speaks of this light as a "dawning." Dawn's light rises up, piercing the dark night, and transforming night into day. From the earliest human ancestors, dawn has been a source of reassurance that once again life continues, that the forces of life have blessed us and we have arisen to see another day. I have been privileged to attend a Native American dawn worship where we blessed the new day as the light dawned upon us. It was powerful.

I want us to think about places we feel the light of redeeming grace dawning in our lives. Too often we only focus on the negative. There was much to cause discouragement before Jesus' birth. The people of Israel were an oppressed people. Many felt their religious leaders had been corrupted by the Romans. The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest was extreme. Many were homeless or went to bed hungry. It was a dark and gloomy time, and yet, God's light was dawning at that very moment. In some ways their world is not much different from today. We see all the difficulties in our world. The message of this season is that God is at work, bringing light into the darkness. When we look, we see the light of dawning grace.

Let me share one story of light. A teacher reached out to a friend of hers who was serving in Iraq. Her kindergarten class was learning geography and they were having people photo shop a picture of a gingerbread man into a picture from where they were to learn about various places in the world. She asked him if he would do one from Iraq. He did more. He wrote a whole story about the gingerbread man. A few weeks later he wrote again asking how the project was going and getting the names of all the students in the class. He then sent them American flags that had flown in Iraq. This started a pen pal relationship with the class that lasted with some of them for more than a decade. They wrote to him as he was deployed three more times, twice more to Iraq

and once to Afghanistan. He would send them gifts, especially chocolate. He was scheduled to be near their school and, knowing this was their senior year, he wanted to surprise them by coming for a visit. They had never met. Six of the original kindergarten class were still at this private academy. He drove six hours to be at their awards assembly to thank them for their compassion and caring. He will soon be retiring, now a General in the army. They will be going off to college. The pictures on social media of them being together was a moment of light in my day and it reminds us that caring always makes a difference.

So, hear the Good News! If you have come this day feeling overwhelmed by the darkness, there is hope. Your particular darkness might be having to deal with health issues, or concern for family members, or needing to make a move, or grief and loneliness, or a general worry about our world. Yes, life can feel really overwhelming. We are reminded to look for places where God's light of hope and love is dawning. When you can open yourselves to the love of God you will see how God's light and glory and love are piercing the darkness, just as the sun at dawn pierces the dark of night. When you feel the dawn of that redeeming grace and love, it will remind you how much God loves each one of us.

Love is the word for the week. Love and grace go hand-in-hand, and the Gospel of John begins with four mentions of that word, *grace*, and then doesn't mention it again the entire rest of the book. As one commentator put it, "the entirety of the Gospel will *show* what grace looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like, and feels like. John's Gospel is a message of how God's light was made manifest, how God's grace and forgiveness is for all and how much God loves us. For John, God, in becoming flesh in Jesus, has committed God's self not only to revealing what God's grace looks like, but living it.

God, in Jesus Christ, entered the world as a baby that will be kissed by mother Mary, cradled in Joseph's rough carpenter-hands, and washed after the feeding and burping. This is real human life, full humanity wrapped around love's pure light. It is a love that "redeems" us—makes good on God's promise to be with us always. Like a coupon that we get to redeem... only this one has no expiration date.

Jesus, as a human baby, is the most poignant melding of divinity and humanity as one. When we think of this image of Jesus as a baby, there is something reassuring about it. It is one I hold on to when life becomes challenging. I often, during this Advent season, sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” I sing it because I want God to be with me. But I forget or miss God’s presence at times when the storms of life are blowing hard in my life, when the darkness descends. Then this image, with the radiant beams of God’s holy face shining out through Jesus, vulnerable, needy and loved by his parents, comes to me and I am renewed. I know God understands everything I am going through. I again open my soul to God with me and the storms begin to subside in my life. A way forward, in the desert, is made evident. The problem might not go away but I know I am not alone and that love of God wraps me as tightly as the swaddling clothes Jesus was wrapped in by Mary. I know things will be okay. Light in the darkness, grace and love. Promises from God who loves us.

We have talked about how we witness this light and “we have seen his glory.” There it is again... “glory” and the outpouring of light. This is “true light” that enlightens us. Through the in-breaking of this light, we receive light and are “lit up.” What would the world be like if ‘love’s pure light’ was at the center of all we do, of all we create? How are we to nurture relationships that birth, multiply and radiate grace and love in the world? A grace-full existence. What would that look like? Well it would be wonderful. AND lest we get too “Hallmark movie” about it, we also know that it is not devoid of pain. It was the love of Christ for the oppressed that got him in trouble and then crucified. It is this “sacrifice of love” that compels us to do what is sometimes difficult... get out of our comfort zones and risk extending the fullness of grace and love to all we encounter. The incarnation of God, en-fleshed love, meant taking on all aspects of our humanity, including rejection. This is life. This is love.

Our faith is built on struggles. We begin with Jesus’ crucifixion. Then we have the Apostle Paul who endured beatings, stoning, and shipwrecks in sharing the Good News. Throughout our history, people have continued to share the love of God, not just when it was convenient, but especially during hard times. They were light in dark times. They were grace and God en-fleshed in that situation.

I have seen this lived out so many times in my ministry. I see people faithfully sharing and living the faith in challenging moments. I think of a person who stepped up and helped raise a friend's daughters after the friend died of cancer. I recall a work party in freezing cold weather moving one of the church members into low cost housing so she would not freeze to death during the winter. We are light in people's darkness. We are love when they are feeling alone.

As we celebrate God with us, may we be light and love to others. May we live as if God's pure loving light has filled us and pours out of us. God so loves us that God came to bring light and love. This is the good news of our faith.