

What started with light ends with light.

## Xmas & Epiphany

*“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field,  
keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone round about them:  
and they were sore afraid.*

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not”*

Later the Wise Men from the East reported they had seen his star  
at its rising, and later they followed that bright star  
until it stopped over the place where the child was.

That’s how Matthew and Luke tell about the light.

John says this:

*“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.”*

Today we come to the end of the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany,  
the end of the season of light and stars.

We’ve heard birth stories and we’ve seen Jesus begin his ministry,  
and today it culminates with this light.

About 8 days after Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Christ  
Jesus goes up the mountain to pray.

And suddenly his appearance changes  
and his clothes become dazzling white,  
and the disciples see Jesus for what he truly is,  
the light that will not be overcome.

They see him with Elijah and Moses.

They hear the voice of God up on the mountain:  
“This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!”

We come to the end of a season with one more story,  
one more assurance, that Jesus is the light of the world.

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But what are we? Who are we?  
Not who are you? Not who am I?

Who are we? Why does the church exist?  
Why is the church here, and what good do we do in the world?

I've always struggled about why the church exists.  
Not because I think it shouldn't,  
but because I'm born and raised in it,  
so I've got no outside perspective.

For me, asking, “Why is there a church” is like asking,  
“Why is there a Georgia?”

But lately a new clarity has been taking shape,  
for me at least.  
Maybe it will be helpful for you.

For the answer though, we've got to leave behind  
everybody up on the mountain,  
and jump ahead from the Transfiguration to the Last Supper.

Maybe this will be a nice preview for you,  
on this last Sunday before Lent,  
a preview of what you'll hear on Maundy Thursday.

You don't need a mountain for this story.  
You don't need a star.  
You just need an upper room,  
a pitcher of water, a bowl, and a towel.

"On the night before he died for us..."  
you've heard this before, right?

On the night before he died for us,  
having loved his own who were in the world,  
he loved us to the end.

During supper, he got up and took off his outer robe,  
and tied a towel around him,  
and poured water into a basin,  
and began to wash his disciples feet.

And then he told them not to call him Master anymore,  
but to call him Friend.

And he gave them a New Commandment,  
to love one another as he loved them,  
as he loves us.

This is how the world will know you are my disciples,  
if you have love for one another.

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Christ-like love for one another is why we exist.

We have truth claims to make, yes.

We have professions of faith, yes.

We have wisdom and teachings, yes.

We have mission and charity and good works, yes.

But this is how the world will know us,

and this is how the world will decide whether we have something  
they should be paying attention to -

if we love one another as Christ loves us.

Imperfectly - yes.

Broken, flawed, human - yes, yes, yes.

But Christ-like love as best we can manage it is the reason

we exist as Christ's body, and it is ultimately our contribution  
to the world around us.

Our beautiful music, our deep traditions and wisdom,

our rites and rituals, our positions and our striving for holiness  
and justice - all of them exist in service to

fostering love for one another in a Christ-like manner,  
or else every one of them that isn't about fostering  
that love is nothing, nothing,

but a clanging cymbal or a noisy gong.

Here at Holy Trinity and at churches all across the world

we strive for beauty, we strive to help others,

to have a sense of community, to foster learning and justice.

And all across the world there are other institutions

that can do all of those things better than we can.

The ASO can make more beautiful music.

Emory can educate.

The police can bring justice.

And as Randy Booker taught me last week,

one really good municipal water system

can do more to improve the lives of a community

than any outreach initiative of churches,

even if every church in Decatur joined in together.

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In 1967, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church,

Bishop John Hines, saw our country being crippled

by racial strife and called a special gathering

of the whole Episcopal Church, a special convention,

in 1969 to tackle the scourge of racism in America.

Bishop Hines convinced the church to devote the largest amount ever

to address this national crisis,

and believed that the Episcopal Church would provide

the moral and societal leadership we needed.

We devoted the largest amount we'd ever raised, 3 million dollars,

and in the face of LBJ's Great Society legislation...

nobody outside of the Episcopal Church even noticed.

Church historians consider Bishop Hines a tragic figure

because he misread the times,

and misunderstood what the role of the church

was in that moment.

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When we care for one another,  
when we bear one another's burdens,  
when we celebrate our victories and console our losses,  
sometimes even when we rebuke one another and discipline one another,  
but never when we abandon one another,  
then we proclaim to the world that the light of Christ is real,  
that the light of Christ is here,  
and that the darkness will not overcome it.

Love one another as Christ loves us,  
and let that love spill out into the world for others to see.

Let our music, let our wisdom, let our ritual  
and our charity and our mission and our service  
and our study and our teaching and the giving of our money  
and our visiting of the sick and celebrating with our well  
and our raising up leaders among us,  
let all of that living out of Christ-like love  
proclaim to the world the light of Christ.

It is our contribution to the world.

It will inspire us to go out into the world and do all that stuff we have to do  
with just a little bit more courage, a little more hope,  
a little less fear and cynicism.

And we hope it will inspire other people to do their work  
just a little bit better, too.

With water just a little bit cleaner, roads just a little bit safer,  
students a little more supported, children a little more loved.

Let that be our ministry and our legacy to the city of Decatur.  
Living the light of Christ. Amen.