

PSALM 148

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him all his angels, praise him all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters from the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever, he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord.

JOHN 1:1-14 (NJB)

In the beginning was the Word: The Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.

A man came, sent by God. His name was John. He came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light.

The Word was the true light that enlightens all men; and he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had its being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him he

gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of him who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself. The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

GOT A LIGHT?

Psalm 148
John 11-14

Hey, buddy, you gotta light? Yeah, man, I gotta light. I gotta light within. You know why? Cause I seen the light and it ain't no train comin' from the other end of the tunnel. Nope, the light I seen has opened my eyes. I mean, it was real dark—inside of me, ya know? I couldn't see nuthin', not even my hands in front of my face. That's how dark it was. But then, ya know, I can't explain it. But it kinda came to me outta nowhere and alluva sudden it was like, Holy Ghost!, I just started this tremblin' inside and I knew that I'd lived all those years and I'd never really seen nuthin. I mean, **nuthin'**! All I seen was my troubles. But then faces begun to appear—I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out. I saw babies and I saw old women and crippled men and children of all sizes and colors and some of the younger women wore beads and others had diamonds on their fingers—I mean, big suckers! And they were all smiling', gettin' along and some of the young dudes were hip hoping' and others were singin' and they all started wavin' at me and wantin' me to come and join 'em. At first I didn't know what to do, but then I said to myself, "Man, you gotta go! You gotta join 'em. You gotta get some of that! You gotta get outta that dumpster! And I did. I went. I had to! And now, O my heavens, I can see! So do I gotta light? Yeah, I do...I gotta light. I gotta light within. You need a light?

Yes, I think we all need a light as we rapidly approach Christmas Day. What a year it has been! As a nation, we have endured natural disasters of cataclysmic proportions, mass

killings—both terrorist and domestic—the likes of which we have never seen, political and social divisions which have ended friendships and split families, dystopia in Washington making our government seem more like that of a banana republic than a dignified body of legislators, and a breakdown of value systems which have historically undergirded our national conscience.

Need a light?

The celebration of Jesus' birth is actually a complex event which begs for interpretation for numbers of reasons. First, because as the world has grown richer through scientific and technological developments that have resulted in much higher standards of living, Christmas has become more and more commercialized which threatens to obscure its religious purpose.

Second, it has also become more secularized as it now includes rituals throughout the greater Christian world that have little or nothing to do with the sacredness of the event. It is almost compulsory that even non-Christians get involved on some level. It is more of a national holiday than a holy day. These trends have served to dilute the spiritual meaning of Christmas.

And third, it is difficult to square the original prophecies surrounding the birth of Jesus with actual history. For the early Christians, Jesus was the long awaited messiah foreseen by the Jews since their Babylonian bondage who would actualize the rule and activity of God among the Hebrew peoples. This person would bring peace throughout the entire world and fulfill the promise of God to Israel to be the Chosen people through whom paradise would arrive. And in the context of the world into which Jesus was born, the specific hope was that God's rule would somehow supersede that of the Roman empire. In the new age, the world would be ruled according to God's laws, not Rome's.

Well, need I tell you that it did not happen? And as the years and then centuries passed, it obviously required reinterpretation. The question demanding an answer was, did we misunderstand the role of the messiah? If ending Roman rule was Jesus' purpose, then his mission was an abject failure. So what do we do with that? Could it be that his real mission was spiritual rather than physical—*my kingdom is not of this world?*

This is why I chose the passage from John which serves as our Christmas scripture for this morning. For what John does is go deeply within to spiritualize the message while still retaining the mysterious account of the incarnation: *to all who believe the name of him who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself.* So let us look more closely at John's interpretation of who Jesus was and what the meaning of his life is and therefore how we can use that to enhance our own celebration of Christmas in 2017.

You see, John does not entangle himself in the messianic mess. His was the final of the four Gospels to be written—in around 90 A.D. So that means six decades has passed since the crucifixion and it had become more and more apparent that there was not going to be some overhaul of the world order with the emergence of paradise on earth. So what he has done is to reinterpret the meaning and purpose of Jesus' life.

The Word—and by this he means the Christ Spirit—*was the true light that enlightens all men; and he was coming in to the world.* In that single phrase, John shifts the focus from an external kingdom of God to an internal kingdom which transcends all things physical. Rather than a fix to the oppressive rule of Rome, the purpose of God's incarnation in Jesus became the enlightenment of the human race.

So the Christmas question then for us becomes, what is enlightenment and to what do we need to be enlightened? In traditional terms we associate enlightenment with progress. The Age of Enlightenment which took place in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries was characterized by the advancement of ideals centered on liberty, tolerance, brotherhood, the rejection of authoritarian rule—including that of the church—and the embracing of scientific investigation over ignorance and superstition. It represented a mental expansion of the human species or in Darwinian terms, a step forward in the evolutionary process.

For our purposes, I interpret the Christmas message to be an invitation to expand our consciousness, to open our arms and our minds in our views of the world and of those who share it with us. For indeed, we all have many dark places within us which we have closed off

from the light. Some of those are deeply personal which we will not allow to be touched, sometimes for very good reason. But others are more prejudicial in nature—sexism, racism, nationalism, tribalism—you name it. And in each case, it is fear that causes us to shut the curtains tight. And when you pull the curtains, you shut out the light.

Yet, if we are to grow, if we are to expand our consciousness, if we are to seek enlightenment, we must open the curtains of our souls—even just a little bit at a time—to allow the Light of the world who is coming among us to enter our room. It is a process—it has to be slow because a sudden burst of light may only serve to blind us as we emerge from whatever darkness we have dwelt in. And it is okay to be cautious, to let it in a little at a time so that we may trust it before we risk opening the curtains further. For we have to believe that darkness cannot overcome that light and that it will never overpower it.

You gotta light? Yeah, I gotta light for you: *The Word was made flesh and he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth....A young woman shall bear a son and he shall be called Emmanuel—which means **God with us.*** Merry Christmas!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap December 24, 2017