

**Christmas Message
“Invincible Light”**

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Friends, the grace and peace of Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

One of my favorite things to do during Christmas is driving around with Maye to see Christmas lights. We enjoy seeing bright Christmas lights on home exteriors, on outdoor trees, city streets, storefronts, and all sorts of properties.

Christmas would not be the same without all the bright shining lights. Lights remind us that darkness can never overcome the light of Christ that shines in the world.

Now more than ever, don't we need Christ's light to shine in our world where many are experiencing darkened spaces caused by isolation, uncertainties, overwhelming pressures on families, health concerns, social unrest, and financial worries?

Too much time in this dark space situation has taken a toll on us in different ways. Many spirits are crushed and weary, resiliency and ability to cope weakened.

Studies find that isolation in the dark drive human beings to the brink of insanity.

In 2008, comedian Adam Bloom volunteered to undergo 48 hours of solitary confinement in an isolation chamber, constructed in a former nuclear bunker, to monitor its effects on his mind and physical health.ⁱ

Bloom sat in total darkness for two days and two nights. At first, he spent time talking, singing and making jokes, but that got boring after 30 minutes.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, listening to his breath, Bloom began thinking about life, worrying about his family, fearing he would be forgotten and left in the pitch-black room. He slept, but he did not know if it was day or night when he woke up. He lost track of time.

After just 18 hours in gloomy isolation, he became increasingly paranoid. His emotions began to run out of control. He burst into tears.

At 30 hours, he began pacing the room, trying to keep himself occupied.

At 40 hours, he began to hallucinate. By that time, Bloom said he felt numb, as though he was losing the will to live. At one point, he thought his room was moving, launching into space.

He was able to hold on because he knew that his ordeal would soon be over.

Today's reading from John's gospel uses lofty and illuminating words that shed light and hope for those that today sit in the shadows of darkness. John's words invite us to draw near to Christ in curiosity and wonder. John's gospel words wash over us like waves that crescendo with powerful statements about who Jesus is and why he became flesh.

Listen.

The Word was at the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. 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.

He was in the world he created but was not known or accepted by his own. But all who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.

And the Word lived among us, moved into the neighborhood, pitched his tent among us. Jesus Christ is glorious, full of grace and truth.

From his glorious fullness, we have received grace upon grace. Jesus Christ, who is close to God's heart, has come to make God known so that we too can draw near and be close to God's heart. (Paraphrased from John 1:1-18)

John portrays Jesus as a soul guide sent by God to bring a world stuck in the depths of darkness, falsehood, sin, and death into God's life and light.

Jesus, says John, came into the world in human flesh to explain and make God known to us so that we could believe and follow him to be close to the heart of God.

He generates belief in who he is through his teachings, his example of loving service and self-sacrifice, and by characterizing himself as The Good Shepherd, the one we can follow and find life, light, and living waters.

I experienced the thick, encompassing darkness Bloom shared, if only for a few minutes, which I desperately wanted to end soon.

My parents took my younger brother Rick and me when we were in grade school to tour Carlsbad Caverns in Carlsbad, New Mexico. The cavern is one of 113 discovered caves in the Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

Part of the guided tour through the 830 ft. deep cave included a Total Black Out experience. At one point in the trail, our tour guide invited us to sit down on a bench. He then switched off the

lights along the pathway. We were in total darkness for what seemed like an eternity. The blackness was absolute and overwhelming; I could not see my hand lifted in front of my face.

Our tour guide then recited Genesis 1:1-5 as we silently sat in the oppressive darkness, his words echoing through the enormous and pitch-black cavern chamber:

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.”

Our guide then turned on a standard sized cigarette lighter; its small light and glow disproportionate relative to the darkness filling the massive cavern chamber. My eyes adjusting, I could make out the tour guide's face, and I could begin to see the contours of people, the colors of their clothing, and the subtle shapes of the magnificent rock formations in the cavern chamber.

He then flipped on the pathway lights. We could see the trail beneath our feet and followed the guide and each other out of the dark cave.

Christmas is the story of God's refusal to leave the world in the darkness of hopelessness. It is the story of God flipping on the light switch in the world for us through the teachings, life, and resurrection of Jesus so that the darkness does not overtake us.

2020 is drawing to a close. So much has happened this past year; much of it completely unexpected. The most significant and most overwhelming event of the year is – of course – the coronavirus pandemic.

We know someone who has tested positive for the virus, has been hospitalized because of the virus, or died from the virus's complications.

Our lives are in a chronic state of disruption. We think and behave in ways unfamiliar to us at home, at church, at work, and in our communities. We continually adapt our lives and our work in response to new evidence and factors presenting themselves on a daily basis. We are a wearied world this Christmas, exhausted in mind, body, and spirit. But we do not give up because God has not given up on us. We hold on to our hope in Christ, our Good Shepherd, who is with us and leads us.

The words of the hymn, O Holy Night, capture what we experience:

“Long lay the world in sin and error, pining
'Til He appears, and the soul felt its worth

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees;

O hear the Angel voices!"

The way you teach, serve, and lead others to draw close to the heart of God is essential to people's mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. I celebrate all the ways the light of Christ is like a beacon in the dark that shine's bright hope for a weary world through your witness and the ministry of your congregations. I've said it before, and I'll repeat it, the church is not closed. On the contrary, it has opened itself to the world in thousands of new and life-giving ways.

I know this Christmas will be tough for so many families throughout our communities, nation, and the world. Know that my thoughts and prayers are with you.

John wrote the gospel to persuade its hearers and readers to follow Jesus like sheep follow a shepherd; like pilgrims journeying through a dark cavern follow a guide.

The story of Jesus - John tells - is successful only if we become a part of it. It is successful only if we allow Christ to guide out of darkness, into his life and his light, and through him, close to the heart of God, where Jesus is, where we belong, and where God desires us to be.

Remember Adam Bloom, the one I mentioned who spent 48 hours in dark isolation at the beginning of the message? He said before he went into the bunker, everything was bleak. But when he left 48 hours later, he noticed how green the grass was, the rich blueness of the sky, and the hundreds of blooming yellow buttercups. He said everything was "staggeringly beautiful." It was still the same landscape, now seen with a heart of appreciation and eyes re-opened to new light and life.

Maybe this Christmas, you will decide to trust and follow Jesus for the first time. Maybe this Christmas you will decide to recommit yourself to following Christ. I pray that you do. That would be your gift to God. I promise that your life circumstances will still be the same – at first - but everything will have changed because your life is oriented to follow Christ and live your life close to the heart of God.

May the life and light of Jesus Christ - the darkness can never overcome - guide you this Christmas and in the New Year to come.

May Christ fill you with sweetness and inward peace and goodwill; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, and Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

Have a blessed Christmas. Feliz Navidad.

ⁱ Losing your mind: What happens during 48 hours in a pitch-black bunker. (2008, January 22). Retrieved December 07, 2020, from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-509648/Losing-mind-What-happens-48-hours-pitch-black-bunker.html>