

**The Lessons Appointed
for Use on the
First Sunday after Christ-
mas**



**Year A
RCL**

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7
Psalm 147:13-21
John 1:1-18

The Collect

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*

Psalm 147:13-21

Laudate Dominum

13 Worship the LORD, O Jerusalem; *
praise your God, O Zion;

14 For he has strengthened the bars of your gates;
*

he has blessed your children within you.

15 He has established peace on your borders; *
he satisfies you with the finest wheat.

16 He sends out his command to the earth, *
and his word runs very swiftly.

17 He gives snow like wool; *
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.

18 He scatters his hail like bread crumbs; *
who can stand against his cold?

19 He sends forth his word and melts them; *
he blows with his wind, and the waters flow.

20 He declares his word to Jacob, *
his statutes and his judgments to Israel.

21 He has not done so to any other nation; *
to them he has not revealed his judgments.
Hallelujah!

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child

then also an heir, through God.

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens every-

one, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we

have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

SERMON

It is the first Sunday after Christmas and that gives us an opportunity to think about the sort of world in which we now live — a world after the coming of the Christ. Last Sunday, I said that the account which we are accustomed to call “The Christmas Story” is no story at all. It is an announcement of a fundamental change in the world. We live within that changed world.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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.

The light of all people (I hesitate to refer to a gendered pronoun), the power through which all things came into being had taken on flesh and even now walks with us. Emanuel! God with us! What does it mean to affirm that the Word, who was with God and was God, the Word who was in the beginning with God and through whom all things came into being, took on flesh? Apparently, it did not make as visible a change as you would have thought.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

Whether anyone noticed or not, the Scriptures assure us that a change had been made in our very

existence by reason of this birth. What is the nature of this change? Do we now all join hands and sing Kumbaya? Have we beaten our swords into plowshares? What is the nature of the change which has occurred? Christians have struggled to answer that question for the past 2,000 years. If you're expecting an easy, short and uplifting answer from so flawed a pastor as me, you're going to be disappointed.

Paul, the writer of the Epistle to the Galatians, did note one change:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

This is a remarkable observation that we spend way too little time praying over. I recall being taught that we were freed from Jewish dietary laws. That's quite wrong. The 613 Mitzvot which make up the foundation of Jewish law prescribe what one may do and what one must not do. By contrast, the Word of God, Emmanuel, informs us that love now governs how we relate to God and neighbor, indeed, to all of God's creation. The law tells me not to beat my wife. The Word of God

doesn't speak to that because my love for her makes any consideration of such nonsense unthinkable. Do you see the difference? If I see a bicyclist on the road who “looks Mexican” and don't divert my car to hit her because I know that the law will impose unpleasant consequences upon me if I do, that's one thing. That the Word of God has filled my heart with such love for the other person that so crazy a thought as that never crosses my mind is a completely different thing. The world is changed! But, wait!

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

God's anointed, the long-promised Messiah, has

finally come, and no one noticed except tiny groups scattered thinly about, sharing the news to even tinier groups, each group, each individual, passing the light to the next, and it would stay that way for 250 years until Constantine, the first Christian emperor! How could that have happened by mere human effort? It couldn't. That it did, anyway, is the proof that the world had gone through a fundamental change in its nature!

I want you to think of a tiny candle flame, a light so small, so vulnerable that it could be extinguished by the gentlest breeze, bringing light to those about it not just for one day, nor for the eight days of Hanukkah, but for those 250 years and beyond to our time, through world wars of ferocity

unimaginable to Mary and Joseph, through an atomic bomb, through airplanes flown into buildings, this tiny light flickered but refused to go out. Through countries ruled by tiny men with tiny hearts it still burns, this small, precious flame, helpless as a baby in a manger. Even through being nailed to a cross, the light persisted and rose in victory. One cannot make sense of Christmas without the crucifixion and resurrection, yet the ideas that the early Christians took to the world – that there is honor in humility, strength in weakness and victory in apparent defeat – reflected that sea change in Creation about which I spoke. We, who have seen the flicker of the light of hope, are to bring that light to the rest of the world. As Barney Zwartz put

it:

The simple claim of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God found a way to reconcile the impossible tensions between his holiness and his love. His holiness requires that human cruelty, selfishness and greed cannot be overlooked – or otherwise justice would be meaningless. His love requires that rebellious humans be reconciled, redeemed and restored to himself. ¹

Sharing that tiny light with the world is the task of those who take the name of Christ upon themselves. Doing so has little to do with familiar hymns and well-loved traditions. A better image may be found in the traditions of our Jewish brothers during Hanukkah. To celebrate the Festival of Lights, a single candle, a tiny flame, lights each of

¹ “For all its commercialism, Christmas still means something”, Barney Zwartz

the candles in the menorah. That candle is called the “shammash”. We who take upon us the name of Christ are to be the shammash to the world, bringing the promised light. That light, the truth of the Word, is that the world has changed, and that the Father seeks reconciliation, redemption, and restoration between Himself and His children.

We have not the strength to do so alone, but we are not alone. Six hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Isaiah spoke of a promise.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Remember the promise of Isaiah, church. That which has been promised will spring up before all

the nations. Share the light, that all may see.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, celebrates the miracle of the oil. There was only enough oil for one day, but the light persisted for eight days.

There was only one Christ, but the light He instituted illuminates the entire world. For Hanukkah a single candle is used to light the other candles in the menorah. The shamash is not dimmed by sharing its light. Neither will you be. Be the shamash.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and
give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square

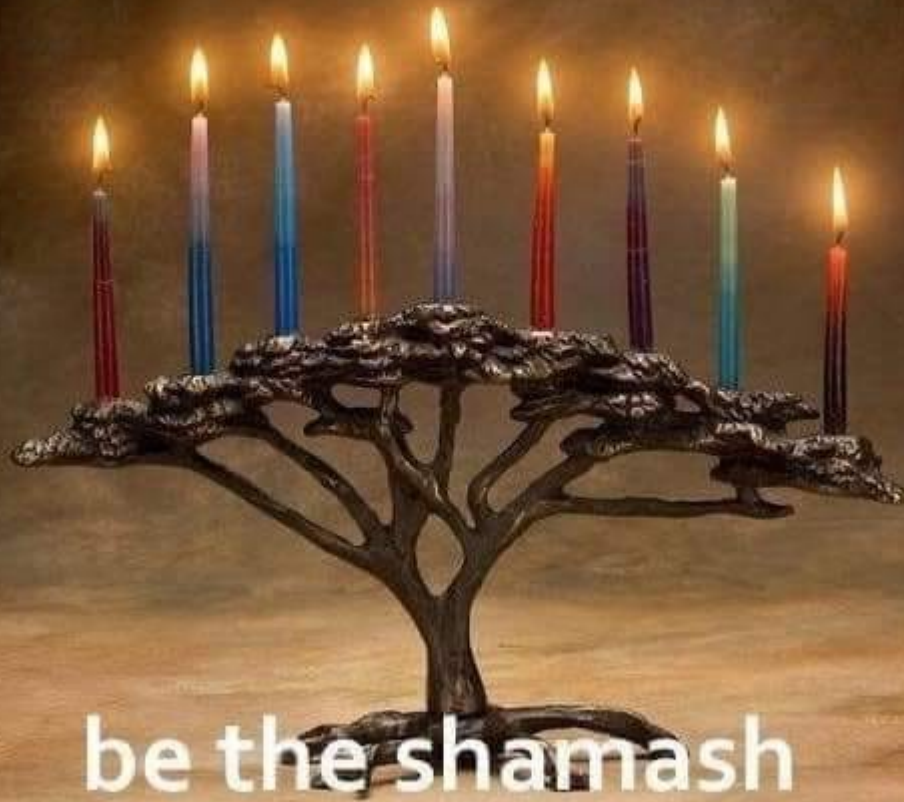
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the shamash is the candle that lights the others



be the shamash