

Sermon HE WILL BRING US GOODNESS AND LIGHT John 1.1.4..14 AFBC
12.24.17



Neo-nazis, “Jews will not replace us...” Or “You will not replace us.”
Friday night, August 11—on University of VA campus—alt right marched to
rotunda of UVA campus ILLEGAL Assembly



Hundreds of people—many UVA students--flooded the streets of Charlottesville,
Virginia on Wednesday night in a peaceful, candlelight vigil for the victims of Saturday’s
violence surrounding a white nationalist rally.

Attendees of the vigil marched the same route as the white nationalists on Friday and
paused for a moment of silence at the spot [Heather Heyer](#) was killed,

****Immanuel, God with Us!
Matthew 1:18-23; John 1:1, 14 (12/19/10)**

Well, friends, it's the Sunday before Christmas, the last Sunday in Advent, the one those who have made this journey of faith before us chose to call "LOVE" Sunday. They believed, as do we, that Christmas happened because **"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).**

I invite you to listen and follow along now as we read Matthew's account of how it happened:

Matthew 1:18-23 ¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

(Then later, John tells us in his Gospel what this means:)

John 1:1,14 ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..... ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Hope, peace, joy, and love—these are the four themes of Advent, as our children have reminded us each Sunday. But the emphasis today on this last Sunday before Christmas is LOVE—which, much the same as the Apostle Paul's trilogy in I Corinthians 13, suggests that the greatest of these is LOVE. And would any of us want to argue with that?

Well, maybe. I mean, if you've had some bad experiences with love—if what you thought was love turned out NOT to be—then you might question if love truly is the greatest.

The tough thing about love is knowing whether it's real. When people **find** themselves "falling in love"—no, correct that—when they **lose** themselves "falling in love," they want someone to tell them how they can know for sure that THIS is the real deal! Right? Is this "true love?"

Someone wrote "Mr. Fix-it" with the following question: "Dear Mr. Fix-it, Where can I buy aluminum Christmas tree needles to spread on the carpet under my shiny new silver tree. I want it to look natural, as if they'd fallen off the tree in the old fashioned way." It was signed, "Sentimental."

Here is Mr. Fix-it's reply: "Dear Sentimental, Unfortunately, the aluminum needles are not available yet; but a satisfactory substitute is to buy a few boughs of natural evergreen, allow the needles to dry and fall off, and then paint them with silver spray paint. They'll look just like the real thing!"

Again, it's tough to know what's real and what's not...especially this time of year. Just try separating the true essence of Christmas from all the glitz and glamour—all the fake stuff. It's not easy—not even when it comes to love—it's not easy to know what's real, and what's only "part of the show."

Christmas began with a genuine, true-blue, real-as-it-gets gift of love—God's love gift to the world in the form of the Christ-child, His one-and-only Son, sent from heaven to be our Savior. Never had there been a gift as generous or as loving as this gift.

God intended His gift to make us feel so loved that we would be inspired to love in return—first of all, that we would love God with heart, soul, mind and strength—love Him supremely, in other words—and then love each other even as we love ourselves. But somehow that "self" part keeps getting in the way of true love.

A few years ago, Pam and I attended a play—a musical--by [Leslie Bricusse](#) and [Anthony Newley](#) called *Stop the World—I Want to Get Off*. It turned out to be much better than I was expecting.

In fact, I found myself trying to take notes during the play. That's not an easy thing to do in a dark theatre where you really can't see the paper on which you are attempting to write. Have you ever tried it? I couldn't read most of what I'd written.

The play tells the story of an Englishman named Littlechap. He's born into a circus family—but he quickly realizes he isn't any good at circus acts—none of them; so Littlechap finds a job as a tea boy in a large factory—remember, the play is set in England.

While working there, he discovers that he's quite the lady's man. He has several romantic encounters at the factory—but then he meets Evie. She's different from the other girls; but most importantly, Evie is the boss's daughter. Her dad owns the place!

One of the songs describes Evie as a "typically English rosebud born of typically English stock, with a typically Anglo-Saxon family tree."

Well, Littlechap is tired of being a tea boy, and he sees Evie as his fast lane to advancement. At first, though, she'll have nothing to do with him. This comes as quite a shock to his system; so he calls out, for the first of many times in the play, "Stop the world, I want to get off!"

Each time he encounters a crisis—which happens often in the play—he says this. But somehow, he manages to survive his predicaments; and he's even able in time to win Evie's heart. The two of them get married; and this begins Littlechap's long climb up the corporate ladder.

Soon, however, his true motives become obvious. He had not married for love, but for money. And Littlechap's theme song spells out his real obsession when he sings: "I want to be rich, with money to burn...My fingers itch to make me dirty, rotten, filthy, stinking rich!"

Now, it turns out that Littlechap is quite good at pursuing riches. He rises to the top in the company. He joins the prestigious "Snobb's Club." He gets elected to Parliament, and is even given a title. He is now "Lord Littlechap."

But in the process, he neglects Evie and their children. In fact, he never forms any meaningful relationships with anyone. In the end, time catches up with Littlechap. He becomes a sad and broken old man—a very lonely old man.

In the final scene of the play, Littlechap is talking with Evie. He hadn't seen her for a long time. He's confessing his mistakes, coming clean with her about his life. He finishes with this:

"Now you know everything, Evie. I was only ever really in love with one person in my life—and that was me." And then he sings:

“What kind of fool am I, Who never fell in love? / It seems that I’m the only one that I have been thinking of. / What kind of man is this? An empty shell—A lonely cell / In which an empty heart much dwell.” And that’s how the play ends—sad!

Two thousand years ago, God looked down on this sad world and saw lots of people who were much like Littlechap: “empty shells, lonely cells, in which empty hearts must dwell.”

The world had been like this for a long time. In so many ways, it still is. But God said the future could be different. He let it be known that He was coming to earth in a brand new way, in a never-before-nor-ever-again kind of way.

And, so...Jesus came. He was born “Immanuel!” The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Those who followed Him discovered that GOD could be here...and not just there, and that LOVE could be real...rather than just fake.

Think about it, friends. God had every reason to be so frustrated with the world that He would choose to stop it—shut it down; call it quits! Instead, He chose to keep it going and give it another chance...by becoming one of us...by getting on the world with us!

This is what Immanuel means. Jesus was born, and God set foot on Planet Earth. Theologians call this “the Incarnation.” We have a knack for labeling things that we don’t understand. God in human flesh—fully God and fully man...that’s not for us to understand. It’s meant to fill our hearts with wonder and praise.

This poem captures it well. It’s called...

Sharon’s Christmas Prayer

She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity
convinced every word
was revelation.

She said
they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
to eat

and they went a long way from home
without getting lost. The lady rode
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.

They had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof.

Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.

Then the baby was borned.

And do you know who he was?

Her quarter eyes inflated
to silver dollars.

The baby was God.

And she jumped in the air
whirled around, dove into the sofa
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

– John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected*, 1977

Oh, friends, to be filled with such joy over the wonder of Christ's birth. He was born in Bethlehem, born as all children are--with the same needs that all babies have: a mother's milk, a warm, dry bottom, a roof overhead—even if it's only a stable—and lots of love and care.

He was just like us, in so many ways; and yet, He was Immanuel, God with us! Do we jump for joy or bury our heads in the sofa?

Why did Jesus come like this? Well, God's Book clearly tells us why. Again, it's because "...God so loved the world..." meaning that God loves each one of us enough to get this intimately involved in our lives!

Christina Rosetti said it beautifully:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign."

It seems to me that the whole Gospel story, Christmas included, is God's way of expressing His love to us and doing so in a way that we can comprehend it. Jesus' humble birth, His life of service, His sacrificial death—it's all about making us feel loved!

So I have to ask you—are you convinced in your own mind and heart today that God loves you? Believe this and it will change your life. God's love transforms what we do, how we live, what we think is important, how we treat one another...and more.

All Littlechap needed, friends, was a good dose of God's love. He thought his problem was that he could only love himself. I don't think so. I believe his problem was that he couldn't love anyone, including himself. In fact, he couldn't love himself...most of all!

When someone asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was, He said, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." God sent Jesus to show us how to do this—to love God, others, and ourselves--and through these loving relationships, to find life at its very best.

This is why I say Christmas is about love most of all. It's why love is "the greatest of these."

Until you and I can truly love ourselves—and I'm talking about loving us with God's kind of love—a love that accepts us as we are, a love that wants only what God knows is best for us—only when we learn to love ourselves can we begin to love God supremely, and love one another as we should.

Until then, all we can do is fake it! We'll play games with each other, and call it love. We'll manipulate those closest to us in a desperate effort to meet our need for love.

And we'll get angry and offended when this somehow doesn't work out the way we think it should. How many times will we see this play out during Christmas; and how many times will it be repeated throughout the year?

The only thing that can change this vicious cycle is when you and I finally allow ourselves to be loved—and I'm talking about being loved by the One who is much greater than we are, and more loving than we could ever hope to be!

Let God love you, friend. Know that when Christmas happened, God had you in mind. Jesus came as Immanuel, God with US—but that means that He is also God with YOU--if you'll only let Him embrace you as His child.

Do this, and then you'll find the grace and strength to love yourself—because you will realize that if the God who knows you so thoroughly can still love you—then YOU can love you too!

And you can love that other person—the one who, for whatever reason, you haven't been able to love. You probably couldn't love them because they were too much like you—too unlovable—until you finally "got it" just how very much God loves you both.

And when all this happens for you, friend, you'll love God. You'll love God most of all—because you'll know then that it was only His love that made such a genuinely love-filled life possible for us.

It's such a simple truth, yet it can transform our lives. We will never experience the hope, peace, and joy of Christmas until we really know just how much we are loved!

So here's the big question. Are you ready--right now--to drop all your excuses and defenses...and to finally, this Christmas, let God love you?

Christmas Perspectives: John—The Light of All Mankind
John 1:1-5, 9-14 (AFBC 12/21/14)

Last Sunday, we got a perspective on Christmas from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. He spoke of the coming Messiah using the language of light and darkness. Let me remind you of what he said:

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned....⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah goes on to tell us a bit more about this coming Messiah, and then he proclaims: **"The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." (Isaiah 9:7)**

This morning, we come to John's account of the Messiah, and I'm putting these two accounts back to back because John also uses the language of light and darkness to share with us his perspective on what has happened.

What Isaiah said, "The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish...", John tells us has now transpired. Listen to how he explains what's happened:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it....

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This is such a beautiful time of year—Christmas—and what sets it apart from every other season...are the lights—brightly colored lights everywhere we look—on the trees that adorn this sanctuary, and the ones in our homes. I'll sometimes go a little out of the way just to travel down Main Street this time of year—to see the lights. Downtown looks pretty good, doesn't it?

We expect this during Christmas--all these lights. And the lights are back again this year—and we're glad. But do you ever find yourself wondering if they would be, though, given how much darkness there is in the world. Not that we need to be reminded, but:

Just as back in Isaiah's day--and just as in ours--there was also plenty of darkness in the world when Jesus came. John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, describes Jesus as 'a light shining into the darkness,' and he tells us the darkness could not comprehend so much light.

Madeleine L'Engle attempted to capture the birth of Jesus, the coming of this Holy Light into the darkness of our world, by using the language of love. Listen to what she says:

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome.
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Savior make His home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed and pride the sky is torn—
Yet love still takes the risk of birth.

That's a powerful description of Christmas: love, incarnate in the child who is Himself the God of love, taking the risk to be born into the darkness of this world. The only reason we can see any light in the midst of all the darkness, though, is because God, in His infinite love, pushed back the darkness with His gift of light.

This is the Christmas Gospel: 'light shining into the darkness, and the darkness not being able to overcome it.' But does this seem a bit overstated in a world where darkness continues to be so pervasive? Well, I believe the answer is "no," but we arrive at this answer only when we understand who this is who came.

In C. S. Lewis' classic tale, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," the land of Narnia is described as a place where it is "always winter and never Christmas." For many of us, Christmas comes as a bright moment in the midst of winter's gloominess—winter would certainly seem much longer in the absence of Christmas.

So C. S. Lewis was on to something, wasn't he? His description seems to fit so much of this world—dark and cold with none of the light and warmth of Christmas. Though we would hope not, maybe this describes the world that some of us live in as well.

In the Bible, darkness is a metaphor for evil. It signifies the reign of despair in the lives of people. To the Jewish people of 2,000 years ago, darkness seemed to cover the face of the earth. It was a deep, penetrating darkness; and this darkness had lasted for many years.

There was the darkness of oppression, for the Jews were once again a conquered people. They had lost their freedom and their dignity. They were beaten down, and there seemed to be no way out of this oppression, no light at the end of their dark tunnel.

There was the darkness of persecution, for they were a persecuted people. They were abused and mistreated. They suffered; and every time they tried to break those shackles, they suffered even more. All they seemed to know was pain and heartbreak; and it didn't seem like it would ever end.

There was also the darkness of sin, for they had turned against God. For many, it seemed as if God were a stranger to them now. Oh, they had their rituals and sacrifices, but they didn't ease their guilt. Their religion had become more about rules and regulations rather than relationships.

So, back at that first Christmas, their mood was one of despair, hopelessness, and resignation. They were ready to give up, even on God Himself. How dark the darkness was.

But then, at Bethlehem—a glimmer of light in the darkness--the birth of a baby. But more than that—a word from God, for as John tells us, this baby was the Word of God: ("And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.")

What's more, "In the very beginning—always—there was this Word, and the Word was with God, indeed, it was God. The Christ-child was born, and the Word of God sounded once again on the human scene.

It was a word of assurance that God had not forgotten his people; a word that He was coming to help them; a word that he was coming to dwell in the midst of their darkness, bringing light.

You know, despair and frustration are not unfamiliar moods in our world. Evil is more powerful and pervasive than we want to admit. The complexities of our modern day problems often leave us bewildered.

People sing songs and give gifts and act like Christmas is fun; but for so many, there is deep down inside a mood of hopelessness and despair. There's darkness, so much darkness.

How we need to hear again the Christmas message, the Good News that, as John said, "the Light shines in the darkness and no darkness can overcome it."

We know the old, old story; and we see the modern celebrations of the season. But when you boil it all down, this is what Christmas really means: there's a light in the darkness—and the Light reminds us that God cares about you and me.

This is a word we need to hear again, for is it not so that there are times in our own lives when we begin to wonder if maybe God has forgotten us? We stand by the graveside of a loved one and in the midst of our grief, we wonder, does God care about this?

We've been knocked down by frustration and disappointment and life seems stacked against us, and we feel like crying out in anger...or frustration, does God really know about this? We look at the chaos in the world, with its hunger and poverty, with sickness and war and hatred, and it seems to us as if God has turned His back on it all.

Is it really so? This is what we need to know. We want to know for sure that God loves us and that He cares!

Sometimes we wonder. In the midst of the darkness, we wonder. But Christmas comes back around to remind us to go to Bethlehem, and there we'll find God's Son in a manger and with the eyes of faith we'll see that God does care.

He's not forgotten us. He's not abandoned us to the darkness. He loves us. He cares for us. We can be sure...because of the Light.

And there's more: This Light of All Mankind reminds us that Christ has come to help us fight against the darkness. God, because of His love for us, wants to help us in this struggle.

He came to them there in Bethlehem to help them find faith and hope to struggle against the darkness. John said, "To all who believed, He gave power to become the children of God."

This is what He brought them—power to fight the darkness, power to overcome their sins through His forgiveness, power to overcome their hate through His love, power to fight against injustice and unrighteousness through His strength, power even to face suffering and death with the promise of His presence.

The battles still had to be fought, the pain still had to be endured; but in the midst of their darkness, they knew they were not alone, that the darkness was not all there was. There was a Light in it, the Light of God's love and presence—a Light intended for all people everywhere. Somehow, the darkness didn't seem quite as dark anymore.

Friends, Jesus Christ came for us too--to help us in the midst of our struggles. He can do it...because he has walked the streets we walk, and faced the problems we face. He understands and joins hands with us as we try to deal with life. This is the Christmas Light. We're not alone! Our Lord dwells with us.

Ernie Pyle was a famous war correspondent during WWII. In the midst of some desperate and discouraging days while covering that awful war, he wrote to a friend, "If you have any light, shine it in my direction. God knows I have run out of light."

This is the problem that plagues our world and, at times, our own lives. How we need this Christmas reminder: there's a light in the darkness!—a light that has the power to transform despair into HOPE and hatred into LOVE.

Did you catch the word of hope in our text? "The light shines in the darkness, and no darkness can overcome it." Jesus Christ is the light that no darkness can ever snuff out.

Now, it didn't seem that way in the early years, for it looked like the Roman Government and the Religious establishment and hate and evil would rule the day. It looked like the Light of Christ had gone out when they hung Him on a cross.

Right had surely lost to wrong! Evil had triumphed over good! Death over life! So it seemed! But we know better.

We know better because we know that the light grew even stronger three days later when Christ left His tomb to live among us. We know that one day right will triumph over wrong and good over evil, because the Word is life--not death; it's Light, and not darkness.

Yes, it still gets dark at times, and the darkness is thick and seems powerful enough to overwhelm us; but it can't! Our Lord won't let it happen. His light is stronger than any darkness we will ever have to encounter.

The darkness of sin, guilt, and despair is powerful and penetrating, but the Light of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ is more powerful and no darkness can resist it.

So for just a moment now, instead of letting yourself focus so much on the darkness, look instead at the Light--the Light of Christmas, Jesus Christ. Blot out everything else, and just see the Light.

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. He shines into our darkness, bringing peace and comfort and great joy. Up against His light, the darkness doesn't stand a chance.

Can you see this? Have you experienced this in your own heart and life? Jesus Christ is the Light of All Humankind—all people everywhere. But is He the Light in your life today? Is He your Savior and Lord? If not, will you receive Him now?

Christmas Perspectives: The Light of the World

John

1:1-4, 6-7, 11-12, 14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Leader: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

People: Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

Leader: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

People: There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

Leader: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

People: He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Leader: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

People: We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Sermons:

- 1) Isaiah's Perspective: The Light of Dawn
- 2) John's Perspective: The Light of All Mankind