

# THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

## “The True Light of Christmas”

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I like this time of the year. I especially like the sights and sounds and even smells of this time of the year -- like the sight of all the stuff for sale -- like the sound of bells being rung by Salvation Army volunteers -- like the smell of freshly-baked cookies. But the one thing that I like the best is the sight of Christmas lights. We see them everywhere. We see them on homes and on businesses but, most of all, on the trees.

And while the world has been celebrating Christmas for almost two thousand years now, did you know that the use of lights on Christmas trees didn't really begin until the sixteenth century? It was a guy by the name of Martin Luther who, seeing the stars twinkling through the trees one evening in Advent, got the bright idea of stringing lit candles together on his Christmas tree and, in the process, began the tradition of using lights on the tree, first with candles and now, of course, with electric lights.

But the use of lights is more than just a nice Christmas tradition that began with Luther. It really has its roots in the very Word of God. Jesus himself is identified in the prologue to John's Gospel, from which our Gospel lesson for this Third Sunday in Advent is taken, as “the true light that gives light to every man.”

Certainly all of us know how important light is -- especially when it's dark. And while we may not fully appreciate light when it's not dark, who among us hasn't been reminded of how important light is when our electrical power fails and we need to break out the candles and the flashlights especially in the dark of night? In fact, I remember a time when a giant snowstorm hit northern California and my family and I were trapped in our home for four or five days without power, no lights, no heat, no nothing. We couldn't wait for the lights to come back on.

Well, the Bible tells us that mankind was created to live in the light of God. But it was soon plunged into darkness through the power failure of man's sin. Without the light of God, man was doomed to live in darkness, not just for a time but for ever. In and of himself, man could do nothing to restore that light. But God could and He promised He would in and through the person and work of a Savior. Throughout the Old Testament God sent forerunners of the light, as candles and flashlights if you will, to light the way. But they themselves were not the true light. The light they shed was just a reflection of the true light that was to come -- a light that, as John says, would give light to every man.

Finally, after centuries, that light came. The power was restored. Jesus Christ was born and through him, through his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, the light of God was re-created in the hearts and lives of all who believed.

When John the Baptist came, there were those who thought that maybe he was the light that was long-promised. But he was not. He came, he said, to bear witness to the light that was coming into the world so that all men might believe. The reason many probably thought John was the light was because of the way that light was reflected in his life and ministry. For through him many were called out of the darkness of sin and death and the devil and now stood in the light of forgiveness, life and salvation. But he wasn't the light. He was just a witness to the light.

The lights of Christmas remind us that that light has now come into the world through the birth of Jesus Christ, a light which, by God's grace, has shone on us. We now, like John the Baptist, are called to be witnesses to that light, to be witnesses in our world today. But to be effective witnesses to that light we must live in that light so that what we say and what we do and how we live will reflect Jesus Christ as brightly as possible to those around us.

It's kind of like this – it's said that in a particular English village in years gone by it was the custom at evening vespers for the worshipers to light a candle as they entered the sanctuary for worship and, in that way, not only be reminded that Jesus is still the Light of the World but also that they, who believed in him, were reflectors of that light. The more worshipers there were the more candles were lit, and the more candles that were lit the more the sanctuary and all the worshipers in the sanctuary reflected the warm glow of that light.

Even so, we too, who have been privileged to have that light come into the darkness of our hearts and lives, are to reflect that light to all around us. In part, that's what we're doing as we gather for worship this day, as we commune, as we study God's Word together, and as we fellowship with one another.. But it doesn't end here. We're also called to live in that light and to reflect it in the world in which we live as well. And we do that as we share the Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ in word and deed with all those around us and especially with those who are still living in darkness.

And so, as we continue to prepare for the celebration of yet another Christmas, we remember that the lights we see all around us are but symbols of Him who was and is the Light of the World but, just as importantly, that we are called to be lights that reflect him.

May God bless us to that end this Advent season and always for Jesus' sake. Amen.