

God's Revelation

John 1:6-9

Understanding Christmas [Advent Series: Third of Four]

You may recall a story that gripped the country in July 2002. Nine miners in Western Pennsylvania became trapped in a flooded mine. Millions watched for five perilous days the rescue attempt on television. All nine mines were saved. But it was the story that unfolded after the rescue that truly captivated us. The miners shared that deep down in the mine that threatened to become their tomb, they made the collective and unanimous decision to either live together or die together. Then they tied themselves together with a rope. Not one of them was going to be allowed to slip away into the murky waters of the flooded mine.

On July 30th the people of the small community where the miners lived gathered for worship to thank God for saving the miner's lives. At the service there were ten miner's lamps set upon the altar, even though there were only nine miners. The pastor explained to the worshipers that the tenth lamp represented God's presence in the mine, which all the miners said they could feel as they hung on praying to be rescued. It was this "tenth man" they honored as they read Psalm 103: "Praise the Lord...who redeems your life from the pit."

Today is the third in our series of four messages this Advent season that serve to try and help us come to a fuller understanding of Christmas. Two weeks ago I shared about God's grandeur, that God who created all the galaxies and billions of stars also created our little earth and us – and then invaded it through a manger in Bethlehem. Last week I focused on God's righteousness, saying that God reached out to redeem us from our unrighteousness to change us from having hearts of sin to having hearts of love, compassion through God's forgiveness.

Today we look at God's revelation. It is in Jesus Christ that God revealed both God's character and God's intent for humanity. If we picture only the baby Jesus in the manger, then we cannot get to the core of Christmas. Christmas can only be understood as one part of the total Christ event, from Jesus' birth, to his life, to his teachings, to his death on the cross, to his resurrection from the tomb, to his ascension, to his continuing presence with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, to his final reign at the end of earthly time.

John the Evangelist writes in the prologue to his gospel, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came to testify to the light." He was, of course, talking about John the Baptist. The light that John witnessed to was the Christ Jesus. The most important thing about Christmas is that Christ came into the world. And Christ's coming shows us that God cares mightily about his creation, about his people.

Light is a fascinating phenomenon. Physicists tell us that natural light is the ultimate constant in the universe. Its speed never varies from about 186,000 miles per second. One of the paradoxes about light is that we never see it as it truly is. We only see it reflected in other things. If we were to gaze directly at raw, unmediated sunlight, we would permanently damage our eyes. John bore witness not to sunlight, but to the light of Christ, God's Son. In beholding Christ, we no longer need to shield our eyes fearing that God's glory may be blinding to us. It was not a fearsome deity in the Bethlehem manger, but a baby as helpless and as human as any other. Jesus came as one of us, as full in his humanity as he was in his divinity.

To shine light on something is to illuminate it so it can be seen. Revelation is God's act of sharing divine truth. Revelation is God's gift to all of us. We cannot attain it alone. God's revelation is manifested in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see his light that shines into the world, and in his light we see God. In turn, the light of Christ illumines our hearts and souls, and reveals to us our sin and our need for

God. It is then through the purity of Christ and his forgiveness that we are made white as snow. And then, in turn and in response, we reflect the light of Christ to the world, thus bearing witness to the same light as did John over two thousand years ago.

One of Rembrandt's paintings is entitled *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. It is his interpretation of the shepherds' visit to the baby Jesus in the manger. The scene in the painting is simple, yet profound. Mary and the baby Jesus are in the foreground, with Joseph in the background shadows. The shepherds are peering into the manger with their sheep scattered around them. It was Rembrandt's logical surmise that the shepherds would not leave their sheep unattended on the hillside, so brought them along to Bethlehem. In the stable is a ladder that leans against a high beam. It casts a shadow in the shape of a cross. Sitting on top of the ladder is a rooster, the symbol of betrayal.

But the most striking feature of Rembrandt's painting is that the light which engulfs the entire scene is not coming from outside, but from within the manger where the baby lies. The light which illuminates the faces of the peering shepherds is streaming out from the baby Jesus. Rembrandt knew his theology. His painting is his remarkable way of saying that the story of Christmas is the story of God's revelation, of bringing the Light of salvation into a dark world.

Light has indeed come into the world in Jesus Christ. To understand Christmas is to understand that we are to embrace God's revelation of light in Christ. May each of us go from this sanctuary to bear witness to the light of Christ, as did John the Baptist, until that day when Christ illuminates the entire world. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 11 December 2011
[Third Sunday of Advent]