

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 25, 2011 (Christmas Day)
John 1:5-13
“Light and Shadows”**

The year 1809 was a year of both good news and difficult days for Ludwig van Beethoven. Having established himself as one of the most gifted pianists and composers in all of Europe, he received word that year that Archduke Rudolph and the Austrian royal family had guaranteed him an annual stipend for life. This would not only ensure Beethoven would stay in Vienna, but it also meant that Beethoven no longer had to struggle so hard to support himself through concerts and lessons. He could now solely focus on composing music at last. However, in 1809, the ongoing Napoleonic wars between France and the Austrian empire had taken another bad turn. For the second time in four years, the French troops surrounded Vienna for three months straight, throwing daily life into disarray and mercilessly bombarding the city. During one bombing attack, Beethoven took refuge in his brother's coal cellar. The shelling and explosions caused Beethoven incredible pain, as he cowered in the basement with pillows pressed against his fragile ears. Yet it was during that same year that Beethoven composed his last and arguably greatest piano concerto. During a time of war and darkness, I invite you to listen to the second movement from that piece; and please refrain from any applause as we'll continue this conversation after its conclusion. (Play)

The history of art, music and literature are full of examples of great works of beauty emerging from times of darkness and struggle: Mozart composing his requiem while lying on his own deathbed; Van Gogh painting masterpieces though battling mental illness in an asylum in Saint-Remy; Anne Frank writing her diary though hiding from Nazi soldiers in an Amsterdam attic. The light from these works seems to shine all the brighter for the darkness from which they emerged.

In our modern lives today, we have almost entirely lost the sense of what real darkness is like. Night lights and street lights chase away the evening darkness, and within our homes, a flick of a switch turns midnight into midday. We can hardly imagine a dark village, a truly dark city street, life in a dark monastery or houses back in the days before electricity. The closest I've come to being in total darkness was on a visit to Carlsbad Caverns years ago, and when they switched off the lights, the darkness around me was absolute and unbroken. The fact is, losing a sense of total darkness diminishes our ability to appreciate the real power of light.

It is against a backdrop of a world where darkness truly ruled over half of each day that John's gospel offered its famous words of comfort. In speaking of the birth of Christ, it says, *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. Not only was this light for all people, but its power and authority: Jesus' power and authority such that no darkness could overcome it. Such is John's good news for us this Christmas Day. But we know, as did John's audience, that there are times when both light and shadows exist in the same place. A room illuminated by a lamp will still have places of darkness in it. Ask a child to go up to the attic or down to the basement, and despite there being plenty of lights he or she can turn on, I'm willing to bet that you'll end up accompanying the young person because they are worried about what might be hiding in the darkness.

What is true of places is also true of the settings of our lives. How else to describe the contrast between Mozart's deathbed and his requiem, Anne Frank's youthful words and the encroaching shadow of concentration camps, or Beethoven's wonderful melody even as his beloved city was being shelled by enemy troops. Every person you meet can likely name for you some balance of light and darkness in their own life: joys of family yet loved ones' struggles with disease; blessings of home, challenges around finances or lost jobs; living in a nation that honors peace but often engages in war.

John's gospel spoke of how the "light shines in the darkness," but then it goes on to honestly admit that the darkness of the world led many to reject Christ, the light of the world. As it says, *He was in the world, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.* Sometimes it is difficult to focus on the light, to truly see it, especially if you've grown accustomed to staying in the darkness. The light reveals things that at times we'd prefer would stay hidden in the shadows. To step into the light means to see and to be seen – and that can be a hard step to take. It means admitting our vulnerability, our humanity and fragility of body and soul.

Two quick stories: Muhammad Ali, the famous boxer, was once on an airplane when the light came on telling people to fasten their seatbelt. Supposedly Ali refused to buckle his, arguing with the flight attendant. At one point he said, "Superman don't need no seat belt," to which she wisely replied, "Superman don't need no airplane." Ali then obeyed the little light and buckled up.

A couple from Minneapolis arrived in Rome after a long, transatlantic flight. Rushing through customs and the car rental lines, they found themselves on the highway, the *Autostrada*, out of Rome in the darkness of night. Fighting to stay awake, the couple suddenly noticed a flashing red light on their dashboard. Neither knew what it signified. Were they low on fuel? Was the car overheating? In the dark, every possibility seemed ominous. At a rest stop they pulled over, and found another motorist whom, using sign language, they convinced to come over and look at their car. Pointing at the persistent flashing light and shrugging helplessly, the man nodded to them, walked around to the back of the car and slammed down hard on the trunk. The light shining in the darkness went out; the couple continued down the highway at peace at last.

The entire Christmas story is built around this theme of light and shadows. The annunciation to Mary occurs when the angel's light breaks into her darkened moment of prayer. The angel's visit to Joseph happened when he had just awakened from a nighttime dream and been told to take Mary as his wife. The journey to Bethlehem ended in a darkened stable, with shepherds leaving their campfires and flocks to move through the shadows to see this Messiah. And soon after Jesus' birth, the shadows of Herod's jealous anger moved over the land, leading to the massacre of innocent children and forcing the Holy Family to flee to a foreign land.

Beautiful music can emerge from times of struggle. Light does shine into our places of darkness, and the darkness does not, cannot overcome it. That's the promise of Christmas for us. In our places of shadows, God's light is also present. Look for that light and trust its presence always. As John said, *The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, his light, his power and love, a glory full of grace and truth. And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

This is the promise of Christmas Day, the promise of our faith. In a world of shadows and sunrises, the sun (s-u-n and s-o-n) always has the final word. Thanks be to God!

AMEN