

Reflection: Christmas 2016:  
*John 1:1-18*

I've heard it said that this first chapter of John's Gospel has inspired more theological writing than any other chapter of the Bible. I'm not surprised. John's Gospel begins with powerful words that make us think about who God is and what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ. Good words. Strong words. Poetic words. Words that are beautiful, but also words that are difficult to pin down.

I was reminded of those words when I opened a rather unique Christmas card this week. The background was black. In fact, most of the card was black except in the center where there was a small star--brilliantly shining. A light shining, but shining in the darkness. Christmas is about light in the darkness. As St. John says, "The light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it." There is a kind of defiance to the light. It lives in the darkness but the darkness cannot overcome it.

It is not a simple piece of Scripture. I struggle with these words because they don't say what I want them to say. I want them to declare that when the light comes into the world it overcomes, it obliterates the darkness. It takes away the bleakness of every sadness, every despair, every raw deal, every horrendous tragedy, every evil plan, every god-awful, life-sucking disease, and tosses the whole mess into the cosmic trash bin. I want the light to arrive and to win, and I want it to win big. I mean I want the light to deal with the darkness in a way that is so overwhelming, so completely devastating, that I never have to think about it again. Instead of total victory, we get something much more "modest" in John's Gospel. The light came into the world, and the darkness that was in the world did not, could not and can not extinguish the light. But neither did the light wipe out the darkness.

Now, while I may not like the perspective on light given by this text, I do have to admit that it strikes me as being true. In the 2,000 plus years that have unfolded since that night in Bethlehem, certainly there are instances when darkness has been diminished, when hurts have been healed, when pain has been alleviated, when the human spirit has shone with compassion, and inclusivity, and hospitality. Yet, we still experience so much darkness in the world.

"The light shines in the darkness," writes John. And maybe that's the thing. Maybe that's the gospel writer's point. It is not that the light obliterates the darkness; it is simply that the light is there, sometimes helping to change a situation, and making it much better, but more often the light is a steady, (albeit flickering) constant, faithful presence.

This, I think, is the message of the incarnation, the story behind the story that we will tell each other this day. God enters into the darkness to sit alongside of us as a Providential advocate, a Providential presence—God with us—Emmanuel. God refuses to dwell in the heavens above and from a safe distance watch the drama of human life play out. Instead, our Provident God climbs right into the darkest places to be with us; and in that holy and luminous action, we find reason enough to hope.

So, wherever there is darkness in your life, in my life, any where in our world, we can be absolutely sure--that our Provident God, our Emmanuel, God with us is there too --a Light in our darkness. And because we are relationship with the Provident God who is the Light, THE Source of the Light, we, too are called to be Light.

And as women and men of Providence, we are committed to make God's providence visible. So, we are called, we are compelled to be a Providential presence, a Providential advocate. We are called to be a light in the darkness.

Being light in the darkness is what the candles that burn in our windows symbolize. They are far more than seasonal decorations. They are  
 candles of hope in the midst of despair  
 candles of peace in places of discord and violence  
 candles of joy where there sadness  
 candles of courage to ease all fear  
 candles of love in the presence of hatred.

Each, a light in darkness. As I think about those window candles--little bits of light in the darkness, I am grateful for so many Providence people like yourselves who day after day— not just on Christmas--are light in the darkness. You are a light in the darkness when you widen the circle of your comfort zone. You are a light in the darkness when you strive for right relationships. You are a light in the darkness when you promote non violence. You are a light in the darkness when you risk being marginalized. You are a light in the darkness when you generously share of your sustenance. You are proof that a candle in the window of a Providence person is a promise of a warm and loving welcome into a circle of friends. You are proof that a candle in the window of a Providence person is a promise of light shining in darkness. The broken world waits in darkness for the Light that is you!

With extensive borrowing of both words and ideas from Megan McKenna, John Shea, and a sermon entitled “Luminaria” by Dr. Scott Black Johnston).