

A Christmas Story
John 1: 1-14
Don Lincoln

As far back as I can recall on Christmas mornings, my two sisters and I would get up early, gather in the hallway at the top of the stairs and sit there and wait. If it was early, we just had to wait until my father was ready. Eventually, my parents came out of their room, said "OK" and we would fly – jump and bound and run and slide – down the stairs, grab stockings off the nails below the stairway banister (we didn't have a fireplace) and run for the kitchen – straight for the kitchen. There was NO looking 'round the corner at the Christmas tree and gifts in the living room. NO LOOKING!!

In the kitchen, we would inhale a bowl of cereal within about two seconds and dive into stockings. Soon the kitchen table was strewn with the gifts and goodies that had been stuffed in them.

Meanwhile, my father began his morning meal. First, half a grapefruit, eaten section....by....section. (Thank the Lord it was only a half.) Then Mom would poach him an egg in his little one-egg, egg poacher. He would make a piece of Pepperidge Farm toast, butter it, and then push it all around the plate with the egg for awhile. Then, he would turn to his bowl of Shredded wheat....and eat them.... shred....by....shred.....until all there was left was coffee to sip – put back in the pot to rewarm and sip some more. By now my sisters and I were bursting at the pajama seams.....**"DAD!"**

But no.....dad would then sit mom down with **HER** coffee, while **HE** cleared the table, rinsed all the dishes, put away the juice – while his three bug-eyed offspring fidgeted like – well, like children on Christmas morn.

And But then came the agony. Dad would pull out the Bible, open to the Gospel of John, and begin to read – e v e r s o slowly – what seemed like the entire New Testament. My sisters and I would sit patiently, with an O-so-angelic-look, ready to explode.....until finally, after ALL these verses, the reading was done. My father would say "Amen – Go!" Then, a mad rush for the tree, and laughter, and presents, and amazing surprises and a family morning together.

Years later, Christmas morning would find my mother and father having to drag their sleepy teen and college-age children out of bed for breakfast. (Nobody in here knows anything about that I'm sure...I see some teens looking around like, "Oh, geez!") As teens we were grateful for dad's 8-course Christmas morning meal, because it gave us a little more time to wake up or nap for a little more.

And then – the Bible. Except now there were no false angelic halos – no impatience waiting for the reading to end so we could bolt for the living room. Because my sisters and I had come to know and love – each in our own way – the reality of the living Christ child born into our lives. I remember as an 18 year old savoring each verse – sitting silently in the kitchen and reflecting on the meaning of the day that had become the center of my being.

My mother would look at the floor and listen as my father would read – tears in her eyes. Mom brought the tradition of reading John 1 to our family. It was my mom's father – her Papa, as she called him – who read the first chapter of John with her family on Christmas morning when she was a child.

Just as it was her papa who had knelt beside my mom when she was a young girl and listened to her as she prayed for Christ to come fill her heart.

My mother's tears on Christmas surely included remembering her papa, who died when I was a very young boy, but I am confident they were mostly tears of joy at the wonder of the Christmas message – God condescending, coming in Jesus, to show us grace, and truth, and forgiveness and love – to bring light into our darkness. So listen:

John 1: 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 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. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

For our family, it wasn't just **A** story. It was **THE** story. And a long time ago it had become, and still is, **MY** story. How does that happen to us? Individually? How does that story become our story?

Bible scholar, NT Wright says "Something happens to people in this life. Not just the fact you're human, and therefore special in God's sight. Something can happen in this life that causes us to become new people – people who believe in Jesus' name."¹

Somewhere along the way – slowly, imperceptibly perhaps, or all of a sudden – a light goes on, and we see what has always been – God loves us; God loves ME!

I remember as a young boy, as a family we were touring Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. We were deep underground, in a huge, large cavern, when the guide turned off the lights. I had never experienced such darkness in my life. You couldn't see your hand an inch from your face.

A little guy nearby began to whimper. "It's OK," said his mother. "Don't be afraid. Somebody knows how to turn the lights on."

That's what this coming of Jesus is all about - turning the lights on. Turning the light of God's love on in our hearts, in our homes, and through us, in the world. This is where you and I see – shining in the darkness – what real love looks like. Hospitality for the stranger; embrace of the outcast; healing for the broken; forgiveness that can melt the hardest heart of stone.

In **JESUS** – when the lights turn on – you and I see life as it is intended to be lived – in its fullness. All we have to do is say, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come tonight; turn your light on in my life.

That happened in a special way for me in February, 1973 – as I prayed for the light of Christ to blossom fully in my own heart. But it still happens to me all the time. Sometimes daily. Sometimes hourly.

For whenever you are accosted by the grace of God – and hear that message personally – a message that God DOES love you, in all your messiness – the light comes on again. Or when you find yourself overwhelmed by joy that something could be so beautiful or so good or so amazing or so wonderful, that God could be so good to give you such wonder; such life, such love....the light comes on again. And you go, "Wow!"

The light went on permanently – it didn't go out – it went on permanently for my mother on September 29, as she joined the heavenly choir. host. So, this is the first Christmas my father won't be reading John 1 with her. But read it, he will. Either by himself when he gets up first thing in the morning in his apartment, or at my sister's house later in the afternoon in Akron where they both live. Or perhaps over the phone with me. And there will be tears. But they won't just be about loss.

They will be about gain – about joy – about life – about love – all the things my father knows were in my mother's heart, because somewhere along the way, the light came on for her. She knew, as the gathering thought says, that God came with infant fists and opened wide His hand to take the sharp edge of her sins and made her whole. My Mom knew with every fibre of her being that she belonged, body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ.

My mom loved a lot of things. She loved to travel. Loved her kids...most of the time. She loved Aspen, Colorado – a favorite place to visit. But three things she loved most – Jesus Christ, music, and my dad. Probably in that order.

Another way of saying that was my father didn't stand a chance with my mom if he didn't have music in his heart and Jesus in his soul. Thankfully for me, he had both. I wouldn't be here if he hadn't.

My mom's greatest wish for her kids - really her only big wish - was that the light of Christ would come on in their lives. And so, it is the greatest wish of her son – for each one of you here this night – that the light of Christ would shine brightly for you this night. That the light would come on – maybe for the millioneth time – maybe for the first time – that this God of the Universe loves you.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. NT Wright, John for Everyone; commentary on the Gospel