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Sermon 20 December 2020
Title: Can You Hear It? (John 1; Is. 9)

- Good morning church! It is so good to be with you this morning—we are glad that you have taken time out of what I know is a busy time of year to worship with us this morning. We hope that you have been blessed by what you have seen and heard, and I know this morning that God has something powerful and life-changing to say to us on this last Sunday of Advent, as we move into Christmas, if we will just listen. Amen?
- You know, when we look up into the night sky—if it's clear, and not too cloudy as it often is lately—we see stars and planets and the moon—celestial bodies that are really areas of light—bigger or smaller—they're lights in the sky. Sometimes we see lights that only last for a second or two, as we did during the recent meteor shower (or we might have if it hadn't been so cloudy).
- But all those lights that we can see in the heavens in the dark of the wee hours—we see them against a background of darkness. That is, the area between them—which we know of course is the depths of space, is dark. And you may have never thought of this, but folks who wonder about such things have been asking this question for a very long time—how dark is the dark? Specifically, how dark is the night sky—how dark is the space between all those sources of light?
- Imagine if you were in a windowless room that was lit only by a few candles, and you blew all those candles out—as your eyes adjusted you might see some light coming from under a door, or through a crack in a wall, for instance, and you might wonder

"how dark would it be if you got rid of every source of light?" That's the question that folks have wondered about space—about the universe—if you got rid of all the sources of light—how dark would it be? Completely dark? How dark is that?

- Now you might think that these are the kinds of questions that would be asked and pondered and argued by philosophers, from a theoretical perspective—and I'm sure they have been, but a couple of weeks ago, I came across an intriguing news story about a group of scientists who set out to answer the question "how dark is the darkness of space" by using empirical data—measurements and calculations and observations of the real, tangible world. Not just theory, but practical evidence.
- Now these scientists, associated with NASA and an organisation called the NOIRLab (which is an appropriate name because *noir* is French for black---NOIR (N-O-I-R) Lab stands for the National Optical-Infrared Research Laboratory)-- these scientists claim, and other experts agree, that they've found out just how dark the darkness of space IS.
- And they found this out using a lot of complicated analysis and calculation—but this analysis was all based on data and images they got from a spacecraft called *New Horizons*—now New Horizons was sent into space to study the planet Pluto (I'm not sure Pluto is called a planet anymore—I think it's a "dwarf planet" now)—but it arrived near Pluto in 2015, and did the job they sent it to do—but they didn't design this spacecraft to come back to earth—and they also they didn't put any brakes on it, so it just kept going past Pluto, out into deep space, further and further away from Earth—and it is now a mind-boggling 4 BILLION MILES away from Earth. Can you imagine the enormity of such a distance?

- Well anyway, they took images from the telescope on the New Horizon, 4 billion miles away, so that's looking even deeper into space, and they took the images that were the most blank—that had the least light in them to start with, and then they got rid of all the light that was there—light from stars and galaxies, and even the light that might be associated with the camera itself—sort of like getting rid of the candles and the light from under the door, and any other light that might be coming in that dark room we talked about—and what they found was that even when they got rid of all the light sources, even when what remained should have been completely dark, there was still light. The universe was still bathed with a glow. And what's even more remarkable is that the light that remained was about equal to the light that they knew SHOULD have been there and that they had gotten rid of—that led one scientist to say that 'for 400 years, astronomers have been studying visible light and the sky in a serious way and yet somehow apparently missed half the light in the universe.'
- Now don't get me wrong—darkness is still dark. One of the scientists involved said, "Space is dark"-- even after all this analysis, "It's still pretty dark."
- But it's not as dark as we thought it was. Even in the deepest, blackest, coldest vacuous recesses of space, even when every source of illumination is removed—there is light.
- Now we can interpret data, and analysis, and observation, in a lot of different ways, but when I hear this news, I can't help but be reminded of the writer of Psalm 19 who tells us, 1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from

them. 4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (NIV)

- Their voice goes out into all the earth—can you hear it? It resounds throughout the universe, tolling from the foundations of creation, ringing out to all with ears to listen, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it!”
- The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it (NIV).
- We find these words in the fifth verse of the first chapter of the gospel of John.
- Now the first 15 verses or so of John’s first chapter are as close as we get to a “Christmas story” in the gospel of John. John doesn’t go into detail about Mary and Joseph, or the shepherds, or the manger or the Magi—John doesn’t mention them--he also doesn’t mention Bethlehem or Gabriel or the star or Herod or any of those historical details.
- And so some people will say that, like in Mark’s gospel, there is no “Christmas story” in John’s gospel.
- But I don’t think that’s true. Now, it is true that there is no Christmas story like Luke’s or even like Matthew’s, but what there is in the first chapter of John’s gospel is another kind of Christmas story—a Christmas story that gives us the cosmic implications of what happens in the stories that Matthew and Luke tell of the birth of Jesus—the theological bottom line, you might say, the meaning of those events that are chronicled elsewhere.
- And what those events, Mary’s pregnancy, and the angels appearing to the shepherds, and the Magi and Jesus’ birth in that manger, what those events mean, John tells us, is this—they mean that the eternal Word, the Logos, of God, who was

with God even from the foundations of the universe, and through whom everything was made, became flesh, as John tells us in verse 14, and dwelt among us.

- I love the way Eugene Peterson translates that verse in his Message Bible—he says "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood."
- It's one thing to say that the Word became flesh and "dwelt among us" as the King James Version says—but that sounds so theoretical, so detached—the New Revised Standard version says the Word became flesh and "lived among us"—now that's a little more tangible, a little more down-to earth, but to think about the Light of the World, the everlasting Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing, by saying he became flesh and blood—well that's what we are—we're just flesh and blood—and the Word, the Light of the World, became one of us—and he didn't just become one of us, and remain somehow detached or elevated from us—in a palace or on a throne or enshrined in a temple or living in a gated community-- no he became one of us and moved into the neighbourhood; He moved onto the street where we live, into the nitty gritty of mundane everyday life with its trials and temptations and its joys and its sorrows—with its grief and its anxiety, with its storms and its darkness—and the Word, the Light of the world came not to snatch us up and rescue us—not to shuttle us away to the safety of a nicer neighbourhood, but the Light came into the world that we might have peace in the midst of tribulations—and so in Chapter 16 verse 33 of John's gospel we hear Jesus say to his followers: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (NIV)
- The light that John tells us comes into the world, that light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

- And so during Advent and around Christmastime we read these words of John's gospel and we remember those who for so long walked and waited in darkness until the day the Light would come, until the day the Light would move into the neighbourhood.
- And around this time of year as well we often read the words in the book of Isaiah, Chapter 9, beginning with verse 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.
- Now, in verse 1, Isaiah gives us some historical and geographical information with which to place these verses into context. I always find it helpful to investigate as much as I can the context of scripture, but I'll tell you—in the Old Testament that can get complicated—and even ambiguous—and the truth of the matter is that you don't necessarily need to know exactly what Isaiah means when he says "In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—" you don't necessarily need to know exactly what Isaiah means by all that in order to understand, to feel, to sympathise with, what he means when he says "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress." (NIV)
- We know what it means to be in distress, in anguish, and we can feel the hopefulness in the promise that "there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. (NIV)"
- And so it is enough to know that the context of Isaiah is a context in which the people of God often find themselves in times of conflict and servitude and oppression and upheaval and war—and as God's prophet, Isaiah speaks into those situations with the promise of God's redemption, of salvation and transformation

- And very often Isaiah's message boils down to a warning to the people of God to stop putting their trust in earthly empires and leaders and remember that it is God who sits on the throne, and whose authority is absolute—that it is God who will make a way, and His way is not the way of earthly kings and kingdoms.
- And so we find in verses 2 through 5 of this passage a prophecy of conquest, of salvation, of triumph.
- But Isaiah begins with the darkness. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (NIV)
- To the nation-- its leaders, its people, and its armies who have been stumbling in the fog of war, in the shadows of conflict, in the dark night of the soul, illumination has come—clarity of vision and a sense of direction have arrived.
- Like the breaking dawn, Isaiah describes the victory that has been won—the plunder laid before the conqueror, the broken instruments of servitude and oppression and violence, the yokes and rods of previous enemies, the boots and garments of the casualties burned in a flaming pyre. Isaiah writes, beginning with verse 3:
- You have enlarged the nation

  and increased their joy;

  they rejoice before you

  as people rejoice at the harvest,

  as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

  4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

  5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood

  will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. (NIV)

- This is a song of celebration for a war that has been won—there is a sense of pride, of satisfaction in lost territory that has been reclaimed, there is happiness that the battle's over
- And in the midst of these militaristic images, Isaiah tells us how this victory has happened, how darkness has been defeated, how the conquest was won—and his next image holds the answer.
- But it is not what we might expect. It is not the swaggering champion, it is not the mighty warrior, it is not the sword-wielding crusader—it is a newborn child.
- Verse 6 tells us: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given (NIV)
- Something strange has happened here—in the midst of a war song, a celebration of military victory, the imagery of conquest in battle is interrupted by the imagery of birth, of a child, a newborn baby.
- But children do not belong in combat, babies don't belong in war songs, the battlefield is no place to speak of giving birth—
- And yet
- For to us a child is born,

  to us a son is given,

  and the government will be on his shoulders.

  And he will be called

  Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

  Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

  7 Of the greatness of his government and peace

  there will be no end. (NIV)

- in Isaiah's song, victory comes neither through the military might of armies of men, nor by the cunning strategies of the generals and commanders-in-chief. The fog of war, the darkness of conflict and oppression, is lifted not through destruction, but by the creation of life, by the arrival of the Light of the world in the form of a helpless child. Peace comes by way of a neonate, to whom all authority is given.
- Surely this kind of inverted logic must sound naïve to the powers of the world. Geopolitical pragmatism and the common sense of empires tell us that when it comes to keeping the peace, the best strategy is to speak softly but carry a big stick, and to get a bigger stick when your enemies get their own big stick—and the endless pursuit of the next bigger stick has brought us to the place where our amassed weapons could destroy the planet many times over, but we rest secure in our domination, in the ersatz peace that comes from knowing that our enemies' ability to annihilate us is less than or equal to our ability to annihilate them. Strength keeps the world in line—we can sleep soundly at night, lulled into dreamland by the sound of rattling sabres, secure in the knowledge that our missiles will launch before theirs reach their targets.
- And this is no new concept—peace through conquest and domination and military strength—and violence-- is what sustained the Pax Romana—the peace that Roman occupation brought to its colonies—but we know that the Pax Romana, into which Jesus was born, came at a high price to those living under its thumb. Rome kept the peace using methods like very frequent and very public and very horrific executions, reminding the populace of its greatness through everyday examples of its power.
- And so when we read the words of Isaiah during the time when we look toward Christmas, we are reminded that the peace that Jesus brings is not a peace that

Rome or any other power in the world can give—and so we remember Jesus' words in the 14th chapter of John's gospel: my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (14:27)

- Isaiah's prophecy tells us what redemption, what salvation, what the restoration of creation, looks like. It looks like peace. Not simply the absence of conflict, but that "*shalom*" that is present when all things work together in unity under the authority of the Creator, who has entered into creation, who has emptied Himself out and become helpless, fragile, needy. Even before the sacrifice of the cross that is yet to come, God becomes what we are—God moves into OUR neighbourhood-- in order that we might become like He is—that we would be made **more than conquerors**, that we might become peacemakers—and not only peacemakers, but also those who know peace in the midst of darkness, in the midst of conflict.
- On Christmas Day, 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote one of only a few poems he had written over the previous couple of years. Though he was one of America's most beloved poets and scholars, he had found it difficult to write poetry since the death of his second wife, Frances, and he had concentrated instead on translating classic works. He had married Frances, in 1843, after the death of his first wife in 1835.
- In 1861, two years prior to that Christmas Day, while Henry was napping, Frances was putting locks of their children's hair into envelopes and sealing them with wax when her dress caught fire—her screams awakened Henry, who attempted to put out the fire with a rug, but her burns were severe and she died the next morning. Henry himself was so badly burned that he could not attend Frances' funeral, and

the burns to his face prevented him from shaving and prompted him to grow the long beard he would become known for.

- Compounding his grief, in November of 1863, Henry's son, who had joined the Union army to fight in the Civil War, had been severely wounded and it was not known if he would survive.
- But on Christmas Day, 1863, Longfellow felt inspired to write the now-famous "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" which he had entitled "Christmas Bells." When we hear Longfellow's poem as the lyrics of the well-known carol, the two middle verses are usually left out—but I think that they give an interesting glimpse into the situation—what's really going on behind the words.
- Longfellow begins his poem simply enough, telling us of hearing the churchbells on Christmas morning, playing their old familiar carols, with their words that are wild and sweet, like the innocence of Eden, repeating the message of peace on earth, good will to men.
- As the second and third stanzas follow, Longfellow portrays the breaking of the new day, accompanied by the same sweet unbroken song of peace on earth good will to men from all the belfries of Christendom. The dawn has broken, and the first light of day is promising and hopeful. We all know that sensation—when the day is new and full of possibilities—haven't we all gone to bed with worries only to find that after sleeping on them, everything looks better in the morning?
- But then, in the two stanzas that are usually left out of the Christmas carol, reality sets in. The poet remembers his situation. Had he looked in the mirror and seen the beard that was a constant reminder of his grief and loss? Had the depth of the tolling of the bells reminded him of the sounds of war and his wounded son?

- At any rate, even in the light of day, a darkness of spirit sets in, and we are reminded of the black mouths of the cannons that thunder in the South. Longfellow tells us that the Civil war that rages is like an earthquake that shakes the very foundations of the continent and the households within it
- And so the gloomy stormclouds of despair obscure the light of day and drown the carols of the bells, carols of hope and peace and good will, as Longfellow tells us:
- And in despair I bowed my head;

  "There is no peace on earth," I said;

  "For hate is strong,

  And mocks the song

  Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"
- But the poet doesn't stop there. He keeps listening. Even in the pit he lifts up his eyes and opens his ears to hear the message of Christmas, that message of hope and peace and joy and good will
- "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep," Longfellow tells us in the final stanza,
- Then pealed the bells more loud and deep

  "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

  The Wrong shall fail,

  The Right prevail,

  With peace on earth, good-will to men."
- Even in the sunless pit of despair, the poet reminds us that the darkness is not as dark as we think it is. And that the peaceful message of Christmas can cut through the din of even the most bellicose grief and anxiety and pain and fear.

- The message of Christmas can be heard in so many places—in a news story about astronomical research, in the words of the gospels, in the proclamations of the prophets, in the lyrics of the poet, in the sound of the bells
- Their voice goes out into all the earth—can you hear it? It resounds throughout the universe, tolling from the foundations of creation, ringing out to all with ears to listen, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it!”