

This text from John is a beautiful piece of scripture. One phrase leads seamlessly into the next as John explains God's intent for us from the very beginning of our existence--from the very first hint of the glimmer that would be this creation that surrounds us, both in the physical, three-dimensional space of the here and now, and in time, with all that has come before and all that is yet to be.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” If this sounds familiar, there's a good reason. From the first chapter of Genesis we read, “And then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.”

John begins his gospel at the very beginning, at creation.

As we stumble through our lives, trying to live faithfully, trying to live with some sense of God's will and plan for us, we see through a glass darkly. We are just the tiniest fraction of the sum total of God's creation. At best what we see is like the underside of a carpet, nubs and knots with no clear pattern—all of the stuff with just the barest idea of what it means. We strive to do our best and yet continually stumble over our worst. We try to say the right thing and listen with some shock and surprise as the wrong thing comes out of our mouths. And then, even when we think we have done the right thing, the best thing, the thing we believe God wants, we find we hurt others indirectly, unintentionally.

In these words of John though, we begin to see the beauty of all God has in store for creation, from the beginning. God created this natural world and all it contains,

including us, from nothing, absolutely nothing. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

And there was no thing that coerced, constrained or compelled God in the creating of us. It was completely and fully an act of grace. The greatest and richest gift imaginable.

There is not a Christmas tree in existence that could stand over a gift of these proportions.

We could, if we chose, spend this day enjoying one another’s company and not exchange gifts, but rather, revel in the incredible gift of our very being and the existence and being of those around us and the existence and being of the natural world in which we live.

The grace we experience in creation is like we were given the perfect gift for Christmas, the thing we have always longed for but never expected, hoped for but never received. We were given it and there was absolutely no expectation that we would return a gift of equal or similar value. No effort to come up with something to match the gift we have been given and no need to feel any guilt as we receive this gift. It is a gift given in love. Struggling to give something equal, or to even feel guilt over the gift is to take something away from the love with which it was given. Feeling guilt over a gift given in love is to make the event of the giving all about us and not about the giver or more especially the gift. Rather, we can take joy in the fact that we are God’s creation, made by God in love, created by God in grace. We don’t need to justify our being and existence, we belong to God, unconditionally.

So it is good and right that we begin this day of giving in celebration over the greatest gift we know, our blessed existence and the glory of the world that we live in. And this gift is far greater than us and our world. Greater because, as John makes clear, Jesus and all he would mean for us was intended by God from the very beginning.

“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.”

The darkness John writes of is a darkening of the spirit. It is a darkness that contains everything that is at enmity with God.

Many of us know those days of darkness, and like the lengthening days of winter, they seem to go on much longer than the actual accumulation of minutes and hours would account for. Whether it is an event in our lives which triggers the darkness, an imbalance in our body chemistry, or one difficulty added onto another—they are long and hard days and we can struggle to see the end of them.

Even nighttime can be difficult for many people. There is a way that our worries and anxieties seem to get the best of us at night. Our minds wander into deep and dark caverns in the night, leading us directions that are quickly banished with the sun of morning. Then we say to ourselves, “what every made me think of that?” Likewise, when we have a series of gray days, we begin to feel progressively more sad and tired and blue.

For nighttime anxieties and the blueness of repeated gray days, the light of day and the brightness of the sun lifts our hearts and banishes the darkness. For those days of deeper darkness, which seem to go on and on, often we don't see the beams of light that have shone on us until much time has passed.

I went through my own series of dark days when it was difficult to be in church. But I kept coming to church—didn't miss a Sunday—and it was long afterward that I was able to see that my place in the pews during those Sundays expressed an abiding faith—a faith worked in me by the Holy Spirit—despite the events whirling around on the surface of our days. Despite my absorption with my own difficulties. The darkness of those days did not overtake me and even though I didn't know it at the time, there was a light shining in that darkness that lifted me and carried me to church and ultimately returned me to the light of day, to wholeness of spirit and to renewed relationship with God.

That light shining on us is the light of Christ, the light of the word made flesh who dwelt among us.

The light shining on us is the light of God's intention for us from the very beginning. That Christ would come to brighten our darkness. To keep us and to make us whole. To turn us from those things at enmity with God and to return us to a renewed relationship with God. Through Christ's life, death and life again, we have been reconciled to God—and as we believe in his name, we are made children of God.

And even as the light brightens our days on this earth and in this place of God's creation, the light that came in the darkness 2,000 years ago has brought for us the promise of salvation and eternal life with God. A promise of salvation which is the fulfillment of God's creation and God's intent.

The light shining on us lifts us up, brings us together as community and today we behold his glory, the glory of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth. This is indeed the greatest gift we could receive