

“Keeping the Flame Burning”—John 1:3-5

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Keeping the Flame Burning”, is John 1:3-5 → *All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

I once asked my junior high Vacation Bible School class this question: Can you tell if someone is committed to a task? Using the example of basketball the students all agreed that you can certainly tell when a player is committed. So I continued: How can you tell they’re committed? They gave these various responses: By the way they act; that person will take his role on the team seriously; he will be at practices on time; and he will be excited about playing the game. In fact, you will even see his “passion” for the game on his face—it sort of “lights up” whenever he talks about the game. He is totally “fired-up” about basketball. You can tell when a person is “on fire” with excitement.

Naturally, I took the opportunity to discuss and apply the same dynamics to our Christian faith with questions like: Do you get “fired-up” about going to church (i.e. worship) and meeting Jesus in the Word and

Sacrament? Do you have such a “passion” for Jesus that you actually “light up” when you talk about Him? Is your commitment to Him reflected in your commitment to the congregation (i.e. the “team”) as it functions together? Are you “on fire” for Jesus?

Phrases like “fired-up,” “passion,” “on fire” and “light up” are used by many when speaking about responses to various issues and activities to which a person is committed. Yet, we have to admit that we are not always “fired-up” and excited about our “passions” in every given day. There are many times when we feel like a candle being “snuffed out,” smoldering in an effort to keep a spark of faith burning as we strive to get through a day. We may find ourselves crying out, “Lord, I need You to keep the flame of faith burning in my heart and life today.”

Why is this? Verse 5 of our text refers to *the darkness* which is constantly trying to *overcome . . . the light*. Biblically, *darkness* is a picture of sin in this world into which the devil strives to draw you in an effort to make you live in despair and hopelessness. However, this verse is actually a verse of hope: *The light shines in the darkness, **and the darkness has not overcome it.*** It is a description of Jesus as *the Light* that *shines in the darkness* of sin. Sin did not and cannot overpower Jesus!

The only connection which the people of Jesus’ day had with light was either their experience of daylight (i.e. the sun) or the burning flame

of an oil lamp, candle or fire. While we may use candles to create mood or provide aroma today, candles for the people in Jesus' day were very practical for seeing in the midst of the darkness.

We picture *the light shining in the darkness* in a special way during the season of Advent as we light the candles on our Advent Wreath for worship. Let's look at the symbolism of Advent Wreath.

We have five candles on our Advent Wreath representing the four Sundays in Advent season and Christmas Day. The lighting of the candles symbolizes the age before the coming of Christ, when the light of Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah became brighter and brighter, until He came as *the Light of the world* (cf. John 8:12).

There are three purple candles. In the tradition of our church purple has been used as the color for repentance. Lighting the candles on our wreath during the season of Advent also reminds us to look inward and see ourselves as the sinners we truly are. It represents a spiritual preparation for the celebration of our God taking on our fleshly nature to live, die and rise again to save us so the darkness of sin, the devil and death cannot overpower us either.

Purple was also the traditional color of royalty. Since purple dye was so expensive, purple material was usually worn only by the rich or influential, such as kings. The season of Advent invites us to make ready for the coming of the *King of kings and Lord of lords*—Jesus (cf. 1

Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16). During the Advent season we emphasize the hope of salvation in God's promised Messiah, symbolized with the color royal blue.

There is one pink candle which is lit on the 3rd Sunday of Advent to light in our hearts a sense of anticipation and joy over our Savior's coming. Not only are we closer to the celebration of Christ's coming in His birth but also His 2nd Coming on the Last Day. Romans 13:11-12 says: *You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

The wreath is covered with evergreen branches to represent everlasting life. Just as this particular species of tree stays green year round, so our hope for eternity is always sure because it is based on *Jesus Christ Who is the same yesterday and today and forever* (cf. Hebrews 13:8). Green represents life and growth. Around our wreath we gather to pray and grow in faith and hope. Since a circle has no beginning and no end, the round wreath represents eternity and the eternal life for which God originally created us (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:5).

In the center of the wreath is the Christ candle, representing our Savior Who was born in Bethlehem. It reflects the purity and power of God in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ. It reflects Jesus as *the Light*

described in our text which cannot be *overcome* by *the darkness* of sin. It can't be "snuffed out" by sin, the devil or death because He has overcome the power of all of these influences for us.

Yet you still have to deal with the presence of sin each day which strives to "snuff out" God's love for you and your love for Him. Many times it is hard to "keep the flame" of God's love burning in your heart and life because of the presence of sin. *The darkness* includes all those factors which strive to put out the flame of God's love in your life. In fact, the light can be rather threatening to you because of your own sinful struggles in that darkness. Jesus said in John 3:19-20 → *This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.* The season of Advent invites us to come into the Light of God's love and grace through repentance of our sins and faith in Jesus Christ. That repentance and forgiveness is what gives us cause to celebrate the birth of Jesus. As our evil deeds are exposed in His light, it ushers us into Christmas where we celebrate that those evil deeds were disposed of by God's forgiveness with His incarnation in the Person & Work of Jesus!

Thus, the connection of Jesus with light has a richer meaning in that it affects your life **in every respect**. Verse 4 of our text says: *In Him* (i.e.

Jesus) *was life, and the life was the light of men.* Jesus is the light Who gives direction to your life in the midst of the darkness of sin. By faith in His atoning work you can truly give and receive forgiveness, just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In Him we can not only recognize sin in the darkness but also shine as lights of Christ before others so they can see *the life* of Jesus which is *the light of men*. In the words of Psalm 36:9 → *With You, O LORD, is the fountain of life; in Your light do we see light.*

As the Holy Spirit enlightens your life to faith in Christ you recognize Him as your Creator according to verse 3 of our text: *All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.* He made us and sustains us in life with *all things*.

Recognizing Jesus as the Author of Life enlightens us to a new way of living amidst the darkness. Ephesians 5:8-10 describes it: *At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.* In one sense, you will be "on fire" for the Lord as reflected in your words and actions. Recognizing Jesus as the Author of Life also gives you a desire to experience life to the fullest as you look at life the way your Creator made it. Thus, the only way to keep the flame of true life in Christ burning is by having a on-going connection to Him through Word and Sacrament. It's not simply

a commitment to “going to church” but a commitment to hear God’s Word and receive His forgiving presence in the Lord’s Supper, through which the Holy Spirit keeps the flame of faith burning in your heart and life.

There are two ways to spread the Light: the candle itself and the mirror that reflects it. We are the mirrors reflecting the Light of God’s forgiveness, love and grace through faith in Jesus. You can even see the flame of God’s love burning in a person’s life by their countenance even amidst struggles and trials. A good example of this is Stephen as recorded in Acts 6:15. While being criticized for His witness to Jesus as the Christ it says, *gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel*. They could actually see it in his face!

The Holy Spirit keeps the flame burning in our lives as He keeps us in faith focused on Jesus, the Light of the world. He brings complete and total forgiveness of our sins in the midst of our struggles with the presence of sin in our lives. He also brings purpose and meaning to our lives in the midst of a sin-darkened world where we strive to live for Him by His Spirit’s power! As 2 Corinthians 3:18 says: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, Who is the Spirit*. Amen.

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