

Nathan Brown
"In the Flesh"
January 4, 2009
West Side Christian Church

John 1:1-14

One of my favorite traditions on Christmas Eve has always been to pass the light of Christ from one person to the next as the congregation sings "Silent Night." However, I enjoy that tradition today for different reasons than I did as a child.

Today, I like the light's symbolism. It serves as a wonderful reminder for us that we are Christ's light in the world. As a child, I enjoyed the tradition because I wanted to see how much melted wax I could produce from keeping my candle lit.

I remember one particular year, keeping my candle lit so long that the wax was dripping through the cardboard protector onto my fingers. Every year, it was as if I was trying to set a new record. The last time I remember being fascinated by the length of time I could keep my candle burning, I tried to take the lit candle with me out of the sanctuary. I had taken the minister's words literally when he said, "Go forth and carry the light of Christ with you out into the world."

However, just as I was leaving the sanctuary, my mom looked down at me and said, "Nathan, blow out your candle and put it in the basket." I can remember responding to her, "But mom, I don't want my light to go out."

I wonder...has your light already gone out? Has the Spirit of the season already worn off? Has the message of peace and love born to us, already lost its luster?

While we were in Baltimore earlier this week, I heard someone say, "I don't think Christmas is as much fun as it was when I was a kid." I'm sure that what he said was true. The remarkable thing, though, is that the aging person who said this could not have been more than ten years of age!

The Christmas Spirit just seems to be fizzling out sooner and sooner every year. Anymore, the light of Christ in our lives seems to be extinguished along with the candles we blow out as we leave the sanctuary on Christmas Eve.

I am not sure that we understand the ramifications of this phenomenon. We think to ourselves, "So what if we have to go back to our normal lives. So what if we have to get back to reality. So what if we have to wait again until next year. So what if the light fizzles out. That is just the way this whole Christmas thing works." This all may be true. But it's not the way that scripture tells us it *should* work.

On Christmas morning, as all of you know, Marion and I opened up a very special gift. A few weeks before, we had been to the doctor and had an ultrasound done. We

were told that, at our next appointment, we could find out the gender of our babies. So, before the ultrasound tech began, we asked her if she would refrain from telling us what we were having and, instead, write it down on the ultrasound pictures and slide them into a sealed envelope so that we could open it on Christmas day.

Somehow, somehow, we were able to make it to Christmas morning without opening up that envelope. Of course, we were ecstatic to find out that we are having a boy and girl. That news sort of kept us connected to family this year even though we were by ourselves.

However, what I did not anticipate was what happened after all the gifts had been unwrapped, the food had been eaten, and this good news had been shared with our entire family. As I sat down in my chair and prepared for a long winter's nap, it sank in that these babies were no longer just babies. They were no longer the abstract concepts we had been talking about for months. They were no longer the idea that we had before they were conceived. They were no longer a word, or a phrase.

No, they were a boy and a girl. Human beings. Flesh and bones. Specifically, they became our children. In that moment on Christmas morning, I understood this season a little bit differently. John's words we read this morning sounded a bit differently. Word became flesh. Light became life. I understand now the consequences of our light fizzling out.

John says that the light, the Word of God takes on flesh and dwells among us. At the first Christmas, that light, the Word, that abstract idea, takes on muscle tissue, skin, and bone—that light is entrusted to humanity. Now we, the flesh of the world, the tissue and bone of the church—we are that light.

We are called to care for that light, to tend to it, to nurture it so that it is never extinguished. Even more than that, we are called to make that light burn even brighter. Do you see yet the consequences of that Christmas light having already been extinguished?

Perhaps you do. And as a result, at this point, you are probably thinking the same thing I always think when I am reminded of what really happens at Christmas—"Who me?" This seventy-five year old that is in constant pain because of my arthritis. This twenty-five year old who wakes up hung over four or five mornings of the week. This fifty-four year old who is an introvert and prefers keeping to herself. This sixteen year old who is just trying to make it through all of the pressures of high school and of being young. This Word, this light is supposed to live in the carnal, finite, bruised and battered flesh that I walk around in every day? Who me? You want me to keep Christ's light shining for the world?

Barbara Brown Taylor says that as a child, her mother used to tell her to turn off the lights in the house when it was hot outside. When she asked her the reason for this, her mother would simply reply, "Light draws heat."

The truth is that some of us allow our light to fizzle out so soon after Christmas day because we recognize our finitude and our brokenness and do not want to endure the realities of bearing Christ's light for the world. Perhaps carrying this light in our flesh is not easy because of our own ailments and frailties.

However, like Taylor's mother said, "Light also draws heat." Carrying the light of Christ will certainly draw heat from the rest of the world. Deciding to live as people in the light often means stirring up controversy. It means calling attention to things that others may not want to see. It is not easy to carry around this light, because this light can become awfully hot, and most of us prefer life in the coolness of non-commitment.

The point is, it is a natural response for us to let that light go out. It is the response of our fleshy instincts, our human nature—carrying around the divine in the way we live is unnatural. It requires that we be intentional with the way we live, that we think about the consequences of our actions, and that we tend to and take care of that light within each of us.

As Disciples, you may or may not be aware that we do not practice Sacraments. Unlike our Catholic and other Protestant brothers and sisters, we do not refer to Communion and Baptism as Sacraments. Instead we call them ordinances. The difference is that we see our rituals as that which remind us of what we have already received in Christ. The acts of Communion and Baptism are not in and of themselves sacred. Instead, it is what they represent and symbolize that we would refer to as sacred.

However, in understanding John's theology, in his words we have read this morning, I wonder if we would not do well to recognize one sacrament in the way we practice our faith. And that Sacrament is our body—our flesh. In the Word becoming flesh, in the light becoming life, our bodies become sacred, a means of Christ's grace, an outward and visible sign of his inward and spiritual power.

If you haven't figured out yet the consequences for the light within us fizzling out, ask yourself the question, "If the light within us burns out, how is the rest of the world to know about or see this light? If we are the Word made flesh, the light of life, aren't we essential in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world?"

Instead of making a New Year's resolution this year that will most likely fizzle out in the next couple of weeks, try making a commitment to keeping Christ's flame burning in your life. Come to church on a more regular basis. Be more generous with your finances in giving to the church. Use your spiritual gifts more frequently. Pray more. Read scripture often. Participate in a Bible Study this next year. Do those things that fan the flame in your life.

If you truly have a passion to keep Christ's light glowing in your life, it will not necessarily be easy. When the light burns for an extended period of time, the wax can melt through the cardboard and burn you. The light might draw attention and heat you

may not want. Maintaining your own inner light takes a lot of work, a lot of patience, and a lot of courage.

This morning, I want to close by asking you to go back to a Christmas Eve service that is most vivid in your mind. It might be this past year's or it might be Christmas Eve from years ago. Go in your memory to that moment where you receive the light of Christ on your candle in that circle. Remember the joy, remember the feeling of hope, remember the sense of opportunity, remember the inner peace. That light is still flickering within each of us. Take care of that light and share it with the world.

Amen.