

## 1 Christmas Jan. 1, 2023

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

This moment that we are sharing together this morning is filled with all sorts of “firsts.”

It is the *first* Sunday after Christmas.

It is the *first* day of a brand-new year.

It is the *first* time I have preached at St. Cyprian’s.

Our gospel lesson is from the *first* chapter of the gospel of John, beginning at the first verse, which begins exactly like the very first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning...”

This is a day of beginnings. And beginnings are filled with potential and possibility. Just think back to that *first* beginning in Genesis. The Spirit of God moved over the waters and WOW! We are still trying to comprehend all the variety and complexity of life that sprang forth in that beginning.

We don’t know what is going to spring forth during this new year at St. Cyprian’s. It’s just the beginning. But we do know this: The Spirit of God is moving over these waters, too, and has brought us all to this moment. This is the *first* day of what is going to be a fascinating year in our journey of faith together. So, let’s get started!

In our Gospel lesson for today, we heard John’s version of the Christmas story. It is quite different than the versions we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke, where there is a very familiar cast of characters: Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, sheep, at least one donkey and three wisemen—all gathered around the baby Jesus. In John’s version, there is only God, the Word and John—a man sent by God as a witness to testify to the light.

Although this mystical and poetic version of the Christmas story does not include the **beloved characters** in our nativity sets, it has given us some of our most **beloved images**:

A light shining in the darkness

A light the darkness could not overcome

The Word becoming flesh and living among us—full of grace and truth

A fullness from which we have all received grace upon grace

On this 8<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, John invites us to pause and reflect on what God was up to on that silent and holy night so long ago. This morning, before we race off into this new year, we are given a few moments to slow down, to take a breath, to go deeper—to ponder all these things in our hearts.

Now to ponder *all* the rich images that John gives us in this Christmas poem would take way more time than we have this morning. So I had to pick one. And it was not easy to choose,

because each image is so beautiful and packed with meaning. But I kept coming back to verse 5, **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

These words remind us that God’s light always prevails over the darkness, even when it doesn’t feel like it—even when it seems otherwise. **And we REALLY need this reminder**, because when you look at the state of our world, it doesn’t seem like the light is winning.

When we read about and see images of the unspeakable suffering and injustices caused by the violence of war and terrorism, it feels like the darkness is gaining on the light.

Each day in the news we hear about the serious issues that we are facing on so many fronts—rising numbers of those struggling with addiction, political polarization and conspiracy theories, an unprecedented number of refugees and people living in poverty around the world, ongoing systemic racism, the challenges of climate change...I could go on and on. But the point is this: When our efforts to address these issues don’t seem to make much difference, it feels like the light is being eclipsed by the darkness.

Or when we sit helplessly by the bedside of a loved one who is struggling with the ravages of a disease like cancer or Alzheimer’s, it seems like the light is slowly being snuffed out by the darkness.

And yet, every now and then, we catch a glimpse of the light shining in the darkness. This year, just two days before Christmas, I caught a glimpse of that light. A man named Volodymyr Zelenskyy came to our nation’s capital *as a witness to testify to the light*. With conviction and hope, he testified before Congress, and assured the world that the light shines on even in the deep darkness of the war in Ukraine.

President Zelenskyy shared that in devastated and blood-soaked Ukrainian cities, in spite of all the cruelty and loss of life inflicted on innocent people, in spite of ongoing missile and drone strikes, the Ukrainian people would gather in bomb shelters, around candlelit tables, to celebrate Christmas and to cheer one another on.

He said, “In two days we will celebrate Christmas. And even if there is no electricity, the light of our faith will not be put out.”

In this historic and moving speech, President Zelenskyy echoed the words we heard in our gospel lesson: **“The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

A long time ago, I read a book by Robert Fulghum entitled All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. In this book Fulghum shared a story that I have never forgotten. It was about a man named Alexander Papaderous. Alexander was born on the island of Crete. He was a child during the Second World War and his hometown was destroyed by the Nazis.

Against all odds, Alexander survived. After the war, as he grew into a young adult, he became determined to be a force for peace and forgiveness. He studied theology in the Orthodox church and in 1965 opened an institute dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation. He built the institute on the site of one of the war’s worst atrocities. German paratroopers had

landed in this spot and met resistance from the islanders, who tried to defend themselves with nothing more than kitchen knives and hay scythes. As a consequence of their resistance, the residents of entire villages were lined up and shot.

One day, at the end of one of his lectures at the institute, Papaderous asked, “Are there any questions?” Everyone was silent for a few moments and some of the students began to gather up their things. But then, a student raised his hand and asked, “What is the meaning of life?” The other students began to laugh because it was such a big question.

But Papaderous quieted the room, reached for his wallet, took out a small, round mirror and held it up for everyone to see. He explained, “During the war I was just a small boy from a very poor family. One day while I was walking home, I came across a motorcycle wreck. The motorcycle had belonged to German soldiers. I saw pieces of broken mirrors from the motorcycle lying on the ground. I stopped to collect the pieces, and I tried to put them back together, but I couldn’t. So, I took the largest piece and scratched it against a stone until its edges were smoothed and it was round. I used it as a toy to reflect sunlight, and I spent hours each day trying to shine light into dark holes and crevices and closets.

I still carry this mirror with me as a reminder that I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in people’s hearts—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

A man named John. A man named Volodymyr. A man named Alexander. All witnesses sent to testify to the light. Do you know why? Because in order for the light to shine on in the darkness, God needs witnesses.

Christmas is not just a season or a candle-lit celebration. It is a calling to a way of life. It is a call to be a witness. Each year, Christmas calls us to recommit ourselves to live as witnesses to the light in our sphere of influence. How will we answer that call? This is a very important question to think about as we enter this new year.

Have you seen those Christmas wall hangings or tree ornaments that have the word “Believe...” written across them? Christmas is a call to believe... Not in Santa or in any of the superficial, sentimental trappings that our secular world promotes. Christmas is a call to believe, to trust, to stake our lives on the profound spiritual truth that all the versions of the Christmas story point to: God is with us, here, now, on earth, and in our flesh. “God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus.”

Christmas calls us to *believe* and *bear witness* that even in the darkest moments of our lives, God’s light lives within us and within those around us, and will find a way to reach us, and give us the strength to keep going.

Christmas calls us to *trust* and to *testify* that even though no one has ever seen God, God lives among and within us. And this Spirit of God empowers **us** to live lives *full of grace and truth*.

And from this fullness and abundance that we have received from God, we are called to offer *grace upon grace* to others.

As we begin this new year, I'd like us to ponder a few more questions in our hearts:

Where are the dark places in your life? Christmas has come to remind us that the light of Christ will meet us in our darkness and guide us through it.

Where are the dark places in the lives of those you love? Or in the lives of those around you—those in your sphere of influence? Christmas has come to remind us that we can find a way to shine light into their darkness and bring hope and comfort.

Where are the dark places in this neighborhood surrounding St. Cyprian's? In the communities where we each live? In our world? Christmas has come to remind us that sharing our light in whatever way we can makes a difference. It is what keeps the light shining on in the darkness.

One time I was writing a pastoral letter for the monthly church newsletter on the *first* verse of Hebrews 12, which begins, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." After I had finished typing, I went back to read through what I had written, and I noticed that I had spelled the word "witnesses" w-i-t-h-n-e-s-s-e-s. "Witnesses" I was about to correct my typo, when it occurred to me that I really liked that word. We are called to be witnesses with one another. I decided to leave it in and see if anyone noticed and caught my drift. Nobody did. But I still love the word. Witnesses...That's us! We are the witnesses at St. Cyprian's—all of us together, each in our own way, testifying to the light.

In closing, there's a wonderful Christmas poem I'd like to share with you. It was written by a man named Howard—sent by God as yet another witness to testify to the light. The poem is called "The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may our lights so shine! Amen.