



Presbyterians *Read*

Fourth Week of Advent

The Light of the World

Open the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or read Psalm 23 responsively.*

Gathering Prompt — *Choose one invitation to start connecting with each other and the week's themes.*

Invite people to bring their own candle or supply each person with a small votive candle. Take turns lighting your candles. When it is a person's turn to light their candle, invite them to answer one of the following questions:

- What is an example of darkness in your life or the life of your community during the COVID-19 pandemic? Where did you see light in the darkness?
- Who is someone who shared the light of Christ with you? What did they do? What impact did it have on your life?

Overview — *A short summary of the chapter to remind participants of the main themes.*

The Word — John's gospel does not begin with a nativity story. Instead, he begins with "the Word," which Hamilton describes as "the creative power and wisdom of God that spoke all things into existence" (122). John emphasizes the incarnation from the outset by immediately telling readers that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (122). He reminds us that it is the God who *created and sustains* the world who became human in Jesus.

Light of the World — In addition to calling Jesus "The Word," John also identifies him as "the light that shines in the darkness" (1:5). The tension between light and darkness in scripture begins with the creation story in Genesis when God declared "Let there be light" (1:3).

From that point forward, light was connected to the creative goodness of God and darkness became associated with “evil, adversity, ignorance, despair, gloom, and even death” (124). By calling Jesus “the light,” John is, once again, connecting Christ to God’s act of creation. He is also telling us that when God “came to us as one of us” he brought light into our darkness. The Light of the World walks with us, saving us from the darkness that at times threatens to overwhelm us.

Sharing the Light — Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” but he also told his disciples, “You, together, are the light of the world.” We are called to “accept the light of Christ, allow it to illuminate our lives, to walk in this light, and to then share this light with others” (136). Christmas—the celebration of the light coming into the world—is a reminder that we are God’s hands and feet in the world. As Hamilton so aptly puts it, “We are God’s plan for changing the world” (140) so we must, as Jesus tells his disciples, “Let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to the Father in heaven” (5:14).

Something Extra to Consider

Examining the Language of Light and Dark

As Hamilton points out, in many verses of the Bible, darkness is positioned as the antithesis of light. As a result, darkness has come to be used commonly as a synonym for sin, depravity, spiritual blindness and death in Christian liturgy and teachings. However, there are limits and problems with these metaphors. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

“At a theological level, this language creates all sorts of problems. It divides every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own time. It implies things about dark-skinned and sight-impaired people that are not true. Worst of all, it offers people of faith a giant closet in which they can store everything that threatens or frightens them without thinking too much about those things” (6–7).

Taylor warns against what she calls “full solar spirituality” that focuses on only “absorbing and reflecting the sunny side of faith” (7). The sunny side often ignores the biblical reality that darkness is also the place out of which God speaks. God exists in the darkness and is at work in and through it.

It is also important that, as part of our commitment to justice, we examine the language we use and its historical contexts. “White” and “black” have become racialized terms. When we create a stark good vs. bad contrast with light and darkness, we risk unintentionally perpetuating racist notions that ascribe the negative characteristics associated with darkness to people of colour.

Examining how we use language and asking ourselves whether our use is loving towards others is an important way that we live out our faith and grow as disciples of Jesus.

To learn more about the role of darkness in the Christian spiritual journey, check out Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (Harper One, 2014).

Inquiry — *Initial questions, thoughts, new ideas arising out of the reading.*

What details in this chapter were new or interesting to you?

How have these details enriched, shaped or challenged your understanding of Christ's birth?

Scripture — *Re-read key scripture passages together.*

Hamilton reminds us that we celebrate Christmas “not simply to commemorate Jesus’ birth... but **as a way of celebrating the incarnation**” (131). As you read the following scripture passages, look for details that highlight the celebratory aspect of the incarnation.

John 1:1–14

AND

Matthew 5:14–16



Discussion — *Questions related to the scripture passage.*

Find a piece of paper and make two columns on it. Label one “the Word” and the other “the Light.” Looking closely at the passages from John and Matthew, write the claims that each of them make about “the Word” and “the Light” in the appropriate column. What similarities and differences are there between the claims? Which do you find the most challenging to believe? Which claim do you find most comforting?

There can be a tendency in some forms of Christianity to focus exclusively on Jesus’ impact on individual hearts and lives, but these scripture passages speak to his significance beyond the individual. How do these scripture passages highlight the cosmic and collective significance of the incarnation?

Now that we’ve spent several weeks studying the incarnation, how is it influencing your thinking about and/or approach to Christmas this year?

Living Practices — *Practices connected to the theme for participants to engage in between sessions.*

Sharing the Light — We are called to “let our light shine before others.” The light that we reflect in the world is God’s light. The Christmas holidays often present an opportunity to connect with more people than usual. Our spiritual practice this week is to be mindful in our daily interactions that we are the light of God. Some ideas for doing this include:

- Be a good listener. Listening well means being present and paying attention. At Christmas, when there are lots of things going on, it can be easy to only half listen when people are talking to us. Truly listening to someone shows that you truly care and can lead to a deepening of your relationship.
- Encourage others. Ask God to show you what God loves about the people around you this Christmas season. When you see something about someone else that is

commendable, tell them that you see it. Encourage others to grow the gifts and talents that God has given them.

- Be of service. Find a way to serve someone over this Christmas season. It can be as simple as shovelling a neighbour's driveway or bringing someone a meal. Or it could be volunteering to serve a meal at a local shelter or collecting gifts for families in need in your city.

This "Living Practices" section is based partly on ideas found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP, 2015)

Close the Gathering with Prayer — *Choose your own prayer or use the one below.*

LIGHT

Blessed are you, God of a new dawn.

You stir in the night and bring joy in the morning,
you stir in our hearts and nurture love among us,
you stir in our minds and bring wisdom.
You stir in the protective and loving darkness of the womb
and came as the Christ child so that we might have everlasting life.

Kindle among us a desire for your truth
and a passion to work for change in the world you love.

We pray that you come
to places of oppression and exploitation,
to places of loss and grief,
to places where people created in your divine image are hurt and belittled,
and come to places where new life and love stir and flourish.

Come to bless creation with your loving-kindness.
Come to bring salvation in all creation.
Come to rule with justice, truth and peace.

Come, o come, our New Dawning Day
and open our minds to the meaning and power of your Good News made flesh,
and let us see your grace and goodness shining in the world around us.

