

Manger Light

[John 1:1-14](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Everybody has a gospel. Your gospel is what you are counting on to get you through in life, and in death. It is not the same thing as a philosophy of life or a personal mission statement. Your gospel has more to do with how you expect to find salvation.

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The gospel truth for you can be, "You have to work hard, really hard, to make your dreams come true." Or it can be, "You can always count on family." Or, "As long as you have your health, you'll be okay." Or maybe, "You have to save, save, save, because you just never know about the future."

You can affirm one gospel and live by another, but when all is said and done, the gospel according to you identifies some savior: money, health, loved ones, work. If we look hard enough at your life, we will find your real gospel, and thus, your real savior.

Now, the typical formula for most gospels is "If ... then." Some promise that if you only find the right person to marry, then you will be saved from loneliness. That's not true, but many believe it as the gospel truth. Others cling to the gospel that promises if you only get a better job, all your problems will go away. Still others believe, if you only get rid of your cancer, then you will be free to really live again. This means that most saviors promise you that your life will really begin later. Not now. Now you are only preparing to live.

One of the best ways to discern the real gospel by which you are living is to ask yourself, "When do I think life really begins for me?" Is it when you graduate from school? Get married? Does life begin if only you can have children? Or if only the kids will leave home? Does it begin when the grandchildren come back for a visit? You can keep waiting for life to begin until it is over. Then you realized that you missed life. You will never have a good ending to life unless at some point it begins.

Since we are at church on Christmas Eve, you are no doubt expecting me to tell you that life begins the moment you join the angels, wise men, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, in making your way to the manger. But that is not what the Gospel according to John claims. John claims that the story of your life began with the high drama of Creation.

"In the beginning was the Word," John says. And with the words "Let there be," God pushed aside the darkness and chaos, creating light and beauty. God hung his world between the darkness and light, so that every day it would rotate between darkness and light. It is something of a creation metaphor for the hearts of the creatures he placed on that earth. So do we keep turning back to darkness day after day.

In this we find the great drama of human civilization. For thousands and thousands of years we have rotated between the dark and the light. September 11 was a dark, dark day for us. But even darkness that overwhelming turned to glimmers of light by those who heroically sacrificed their lives trying to save others. So it has always been. You are not living a private little isolated life. Whether you can see this or not—and after this fall how can you not see it—your life is caught up in the great cosmic struggle between light and darkness. God will not allow your life to be reduced to job interviews and minivans. He has made your life a chapter of a much more dramatic story than that. This is a story that began before you did, and it will continue long after you're gone.

The gospel truth is that life doesn't begin with your dreams. It begins with the dreams of God for your life. What God wants to know is will you use your fleeting days to spread the dark chaos further throughout our earth, or will you use them to bring light and beauty into some dark corner of the earth?

When life is over, and people are standing at your funeral to eulogize you, who wants them to say, "This person was a force of darkness in the world"? No, we would love to think that there is a holy even heroic purpose to our lives, that we have lived well, and that because of us there is a bit more light in the world.

The New York Times has been running a series of pages that provide brief biographies of those who lost their lives in the collapse of the twin towers. Many of them died heroically trying to save others. When you read those biographies you are struck by how ordinary these people were. They were just like us. If you were confronted with an opportunity to place it all the line, in a moment, and choose whether your life will be used for good or evil, you too would probably make the same heroic choice. But the chances are great that life will not give you that moment. Maybe it will, but probably not. It is more likely that you will make your choices about good and evil with a hundred different small choices every day. What will you do with your money? How will you treat those in the office? What kind of time will you give your children?

Since these choices are so small, we don't see them for the level of heroism that lies behind them. So we just do what we want—what will make us happy, even if it is at the expense of others. This means that the darkness slowly seeps into our hearts an inch at a time. Eventually we have so much darkness in our own hearts, where the real drama between good and evil takes place, that we cannot do the good we would love to do. You are never going to be able to pull the world out of the darkness on your own. Neither can you do that for your family. You can't even do it for your own heart.

As the Gospel according to John continues, God could not continue to watch his beloved creatures become lost in so much darkness,

especially the darkness of our own making. So he entered the darkness to find us. Now we are ready to come to the manger, where the creative Word God spoke at the beginning of the story has become flesh and dwelled among us.

From this manger comes the most remarkable claim. We are not saying that this baby became just a teacher to show you a better way to live. Nor are we saying that this is a sentimental moment that can distract you from the darkness of the world. We are saying that as the Son was with the Father and the Spirit at creation, shoving aside the darkness to bring light, so is he the source of light in your life and the light of the world who brings creative hope into every dark moment. As John concludes, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it."

That's saying a lot for a baby. When we look at the manger in the vesper light, frankly we are not blinded. There is just a ray of light that pierces the darkness. But it is all the light we need, and to tell you the truth, it is all the light we can handle. Too much light shining on people who have lived in darkness is overwhelming. What would have happened to Mary if she had known everything that would happen to her son in 33 years? It would kill a mother to have that much light. It would blind you to see all the hope the light of Christ will bring. For now, the tender light that comes from the manger is enough. It is enough to make us not only unafraid of the dark, but also a source of light in the great historic drama of good and evil.

All the paintings of the nativity by the great masters capture this wonderful truth. The background of these paintings is always dark. What little light is provided emanates from the manger as it reflects on the faces of those who gaze into the manger. What these artists are saying is that your calling is not to be the light, but simply to get as close to the manger as you can. Then the light shines on you. It is the only way the darkened world around you will see the light, and the only way we will find the path home to God. That is the gospel truth.

O God Emmanuel, on this holy night, may we not miss our moment. Give us the vision to see the light from the manger, that we may reflect your hope into a world lost in the darkness. Amen.