



*Priscilla Hochhalter*

One winter day at church, a friend and I felt a charge in the air. The whole congregation seemed abuzz with joy. I wondered why, because it wasn't a special day or holiday. But my friend smiled and said, "It's because the sun is out."

Ecclesiastes 11:7 says: "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun." I love snow and rain, but I can't deny that great feeling when light pierces the clouds.

This week we celebrate Advent, when each twinkling light and sparkling star reminds us that the light of Christ has come into the world. Just as sunlight brightens a cloudy day, so *his* light brightens our darkness. Amen, Lord—let it shine!

*BIBLE READING: Luke 2:25-32*

I love Advent, the time when we honor Christ's coming. But his birth probably didn't occur at this time of year, so why do we celebrate it now? History offers some clues.

In the northern hemisphere, starting with the summer solstice (the longest day of the year) on about June 21, day by day the number of daylight hours decreases until the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year) on about December 21, which has fewer daylight hours than any other day. Then, day by day the number of daylight hours starts to increase again. Light is returning to the world.

Tradition says this factor is one reason early Christians chose late December to celebrate Christmas. Pagans already celebrated the winter solstice, but Christians wanted to link Christ's birth to the return of God's light to a dark world.

Many Scriptures predict Christ's advent in terms of light—a symbol of hope. Isaiah 9:2 says: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." And in today's verses, Simeon quotes Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, which promise God's salvation in the form of light and revelation to all nations. The time of year when light begins to increase really is the perfect time to celebrate Christ's birth.

*SONG: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, Advent honors your coming, and I am so glad you came. Thank you. I love you.*

*—Priscilla Hochhalter*

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 36:5-9*

Like everything else in the universe, light was created by God; he spoke it into being (Genesis 1:3-5).

In fact, light was the first thing ever created, before the sun or moon (Genesis 1:14-18), and it will continue after they are gone (Revelation 21:23-24; 22:5) because the only true light source is God himself.

This is a mystery: God *is* light (1 John 1:5), yet he also *created* light. All things, including life itself, are created and sustained by it.

Jesus said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Here again, as in Genesis and in the last verse of today’s Scripture, we see that light and life are related. And both come only from God. So when Jesus claims he is “the light” and also “the life” (John 14:6), each claim affirms the other, and both claims affirm his deity.

God’s very life is light, and his light is life, illuminating and animating all things. John 1:4-5 says simply: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” During Advent, we celebrate this great truth.

*SONG: O Little Town of Bethlehem*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I crave your light and your life. Please illuminate and animate my heart with your holy presence.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: 1 John 1:5-9; 2:8-10*

We've already seen that light is equated with life. But today's verses equate it with something else: love.

1 John 1:5-7 lays the groundwork. First, the setup: God is light, and in him is no darkness. Next, the catch: If we say we have fellowship (with him) but walk in darkness, we are liars. Then, a wonderful exchange: If we walk in the light, we *do* have fellowship (with others) and his blood purifies us of sin. And a paradox: if we deny our sin we are deceived, but if we confess it we are cleansed—that is, made pure and holy.

Finally, in 1 John 2:8-10, a kicker: There is a “new command” and its truth is visible (in the light), but anyone who claims to be in the light while hating others is in darkness. And a promise: If we love others, we live in the light and will not fall.

What is this “new command” (v. 8)? I believe it is Jesus' new command to love one another (John 13:34).

So Scripture equates living in the light with loving others. It also equates light with purity by saying that if we walk in the light, we have fellowship, and Jesus' blood purifies us from sin. These are deep concepts, but let the light of Christmas remind you of them.

*SONG: O Holy Night*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, thank you for coming to earth on that holy night. Purify me by your light, your love, and your blood.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Isaiah 58:6-10*

Related to yesterday's topic of light, love, and purity is today's topic: light, healing, and reward for the charitable.

Today's passage says fasting means nothing unless one practices true justice and charity. It then promises that those who do practice them will shine and find healing, along with righteousness, glory, and help from God (vv. 8-9). So light is associated with healing—literally, in fact, as in modern laser medicine!—and with reward for being charitable and just, (See Isaiah 30:26; Psalm 97:11; 112:4; and Proverbs 4:18, which confirm: “The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”)

In the old carol, King Wenceslas (based on the life of Vaclav the Good in 907-935) is so charitable to the poor that his footsteps warm the snowy ground. He was a Czech duke who posthumously was made a saint and given the title of “king.” The outpouring of love and written tributes to this saint after his death indicate that he gave great help and charity to many people.

I like the idea that if we help the poor and vulnerable (vv. 6-7), our “light will break forth” and our “healing will quickly appear” (v. 8). And Advent is the perfect time to help them.

*SONG: Good King Wenceslas*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I'd love to see my light break forth and my healing appear. Tell me one way I can help the vulnerable, and don't stop until I actually do it.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 18:28*

The most basic function of light is to dispel darkness.

Last Christmas, my in-laws rented a cabin on Lake Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. That week we had a twenty-year record snowfall of fourteen inches and many hilarious hours of hiking, sledging, card playing, and coffee guzzling. By Christmas night, gifts were opened, dinner was done, and people had gone to sleep—but even after reading awhile, sleep wouldn't come. So I packed on my snow clothes and went walking in the tiny wee hours.

I had the whole snow-silent world to myself. A neighbor's multicolored lights cast rainbows down the road. Stars reflected off the lake like spilled diamonds. And on that Christmas night the moon was full (did you see it?). It glowed through the ghostly snow clouds like a pearl in angel hair, making the evergreens cast tall shadows on the snow.

Even in the dead of night, in a remote location where I had no streetlights or flashlight, I could see clearly because the light of the moon dispelled the darkness. Light does that.

Light also dispels spiritual darkness, deception, and sin, for nothing is hidden from God (Psalm 90:8; 139:11-12).

Ephesians 5:8 says we were once darkness but now we are light; and 1 Peter 2:9 says God has called us “out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Hallelujah!

*SONG: In the Bleak Midwinter*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, you turn our darkness to light. Help us to walk in the light, as you are in the light.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 119:105, 130*

In 2015, many nations and high-tech organizations (my employer included) celebrated the United Nations' International Year of Light to focus on the benefits of light to all life. But the benefits of light exceed science; they are spiritual too.

In today's verses, light provides guidance and wisdom (almost synonyms here); it shows the way and gives us God's perspective and understanding. Light also gives courage: "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). Here I think "light" is God's presence—his love, wisdom, power, and more. When we feel his help in all of these ways, our fears shrink. Light overcomes fear.

Light even brings victory: "It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them" (Psalm 44:3). Via the pillar of fire and cloud, God's love and light led the Hebrews and protected them from their enemies (Exodus 14:19-20).

As we've seen, light means life, love, purity, healing, guidance, wisdom, courage, protection, victory, and every other gift from God, the Father of lights (James 1:17).

Yet miraculously, God sent all of these gifts in a tiny baby, lying in a manger. He is the light of the world.

*SONG: Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Baby Jesus, thank you for coming to light our darkness. We welcome you with joy!*

—Priscilla Hochhalter

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 104:1-4*

Today's verses describe the Lord as being clothed in glory and light, with flames of fire as his servants. Similarly, the disciples see the Lord transfigured in light, and Ezekiel, Daniel, and John (in Revelation) all describe him in terms of light—his face and body flashing like lightning, fire, or the sun (Matthew 17:1-8; Ezekiel 1:22-28; Daniel 10:4-9; Revelation 1:12-18). In each case, mortals fall down in awe and terror before him. I think this is because our holy God lives in “unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16).

Most of us have only seen “unapproachable light” in the movies—you know, when the meteorite falls or the spaceship lands, and everyone turns away from its painful brilliance. Those depictions are fanciful, but in God's presence such a thing is real. We can't do so yet, but one day in our heavenly bodies we will be able to be near him. There will be no more obstacles—no more sin, pain, or impurity of any kind. And finally even death will be overcome: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

These claims are breathtaking, almost beyond belief. But they are true. I urge you to dare to believe them, embrace them, live in them. Jesus came for you, and for me.

*SONG: Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, it is hard to believe that one so holy came to save the unholy—but you did! We receive this truth with gladness. Thank you.*

—Priscilla Hochhalter