

Session 4

Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas

By Adam Hamilton

Chapter 4: "The Light of the World"

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Introduction Recap...

The word "incarnation" comes from a Latin word that means, "embodiment" or "become flesh". One of the foundational beliefs of Christians is in the incarnation, that God actually became flesh in the person of Jesus. The church has struggled throughout centuries to explain the "how" of this mystery. Instead of focusing on the "how", Hamilton in this book seeks to answer the questions "why" and "to what end" for Christians today.

Some of the questions that will be asked include:

- Why would God come to us in Jesus?
- What was the purpose of the Incarnation?
- How are we meant to respond to the Incarnation, to God's coming to us in Jesus, today?

In each chapter, Hamilton will focus on one or more names/titles used by the Gospel writers as they introduce the story of Jesus. Hamilton encourages each of us to read one chapter each week during the Season of Advent, with the Epilogue read after Christmas Day or during Epiphany Sunday.

Opening Activity – "Light in the Darkness"

- **What are your feelings, thoughts, or reactions to seeing a "light in the darkness"?**

In this week's chapter, Adam Hamilton looks at three more titles for Jesus that we find in the Bible referring to his Incarnation. One of these words will be "Light of the World". Think about that title, and the others, in the light of the world in which we live.

Chapter 4 Recap...

While most of us know that Christmas is the celebration of Jesus's birth, many of our memories focus on the opening of presents around the Christmas tree. Hamilton noted that there is often times more joy in watching others open their gifts, especially if much thought has gone in to purchasing and making them, than in opening our own gifts. As Jesus said, it truly is more a blessing to give rather than receive.

However, what happens if a well thought out gift is opened and quickly put aside? Maybe no words of appreciation are spoken at all...The feelings felt then can be as equally unsatisfying and hurtful. The act of giving – and the gift Himself – is our focus for this chapter. So far, we have looked at the names found in Matthew and Luke – Messiah, Savior, and Emmanuel. While Mark does not have a birth narrative, he identifies Jesus at the beginning of his ministry as Messiah/Christ, Savior, and God's Son. Tonight, we look at John's Gospel and the titles he uses to describe Jesus.

Hamilton states that John is often referred to as the "spiritual gospel". In just looking at the birth of Jesus, we do not see the many elements that we are used to in the other accounts – Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, shepherds, wise men, etc. Yet, John's account is rich in meaning. Hamilton shares how their congregation celebrates Christmas Eve, with emphasis on light and darkness. He states, "We remind the congregation that we cannot appreciate the light that Christ brings until we linger in the darkness for a moment." (p. 121) This is where John's opening words are so powerful. The same One who was in the beginning – bringing light into the world – is the same incarnate baby who came to earth. This is Incarnation. "The Word – the creative power and wisdom of God that spoke all things into existence – took on flesh as an infant in Bethlehem." (p. 122)

The dual ideas of light and darkness are found throughout the Bible. We find them on the first page in Genesis and the last page in Revelation. The Bible highlights the tension between the two, with the power of light coming from God. Darkness is often associated with evil, adversity, despair, and even death. Light is often associated with God, goodness, knowledge, and life.

Two broad categories describe darkness in scripture. First, the moral darkness is what we see all around us. War, violence, terrorist attacks, selfish acts, abuse – all that harms others. When we stray from walking in the path/light of God, we move toward darkness. This battle between good and evil is a major

theme in human existence. It is battle in the both the outside and the inside. Second, an existential/situational darkness is often associated with grief, despair, and sadness. A perfect example of this is in the story of Job.

“Christmas, the Incarnation of God, is God’s response to both forms of darkness, the moral and existential.” (p. 127) For the believers in the Old Testament, it was their faith in God that helped them emerge from the darkness. It was their belief that God was always with them and their knowledge of God’s presence that helped them survive those times of despair. “They trusted, bare-knuckled, holding fast onto their faith that God was walking with them, and that God would sustain them because God is light and calls us out of darkness and chaos.”

This brings us to John’s telling of the Christmas story. His account makes real for us the cosmic significance of Jesus coming to Earth – Incarnation – as a response for both types of darkness in the world. In Genesis, when God speaks everything came into being. In John 1, Jesus is described as the “Word” and all things came into being through Him. He was the “Word” that brought light into the world. Each week as we light a candle in the Advent wreath, we are reminded that the light came into the world. The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that they do not have to walk in the darkness anymore. Jesus walks with us in the darkest hours. “He came to embody the light that God brings to us – to demonstrate God’s compassion to the sick, to offer God’s mercy to sinners, and to teach us by his words and example how to live as children of the light.” (p. 129)

Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus shares with his disciples that he is the “Light of the World”. This is the celebration of Christmas – the Light piercing the darkness. God’s light coming to enlighten our lives as we walk with Him. Early on in Christian history, the believers focused more on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Early Jewish people did not celebrate birthdays, so a “date of birth” was often unknown. Jesus’ death, however, could be dated with the Passover and use of the lunar calendar. However, there was still a yearning to celebrate his birth, to focus on the Incarnation. Not knowing the exact date, one date seemed most fitting – the winter solstice (in the Julian calendar of biblical times, this would be December 25; in the Gregorian calendar that we follow today, this would be December 21). Some say Jesus’s birth was chosen as the winter solstice to combat alternate pagan holidays and festivals. However, up until the winter solstice, darkness increases and daytime decreases. The solstice represents the

turning point, the transition when the light starts overcoming the dark. Daytime pushes back. A fitting choice for Jesus's birthday.

Jesus entering the world came to bring light. Jesus came to help save us from ourselves – our temptation to the darkness – to challenge us to walk in the light. Not just to walk, though, but to take it into the world. He came to conquer both forms of darkness.

The Gospel of John also gives the name/title to Jesus, "The Word". In Greek, the "Word" is defined as *logos* – which also carries the meaning of wisdom, reasoning, or logic. As the Incarnation, Jesus is the authoritative Word, reasoning about God, and wisdom of God. God self-disclosed Himself in Jesus to humanity. This Word of God, the Light of the World, came to us in the form of a baby. What better image of love than a baby? Jesus was God's Word, His testament of love to us. Jesus's words, actions, and life embody for us and Incarnate for us God's love for us – that has been there from the beginning.

As believers, our job is to both accept the light/word, and allow it to illuminate our lives – in our words, our actions, and our personal walk. The early church saw a conversion as turning from the darkness towards the light. "When we say yes to Jesus, when we yield our lives to him, we move from darkness into light." (p. 137) Jesus challenged his disciples – and believers of today – to be the light of the world. We bear his light inside of us and incarnate his light to the world.

God knows there is darkness in the world – children who are hungry, men and women without homes, evil that causes hurt and pain. This may often make us stop and ask, "Why won't God do something?" He did. He sent Jesus to be the light. We experienced the light and are challenged to go out into the world. "We are God's plan for changing the world." (p. 140) As Christians, we are not just passive recipients of the love and grace of God. When we accept the light, it lives inside of us and should flow out and touch the lives of others. Every time we do this the darkness recedes just a little bit, and the light wins.

Through Jesus, God's revolution to change the world began. We need to pay attention to the needs and act on His behalf. What does this look like? Isaiah 58 shares a glimpse of this – fighting injustice, sharing your food with the hungry, providing shelter to the homeless, and clothing the naked. When we do this, the darkness recedes and the light shines through. When we share this light, it also heals us. As believers, when we focus on someone other than ourselves, we

experience true joy and fulfillment. Hamilton shares the story about a true “Secret Santa” in Kansas City. Hamilton was blessed to interview this “anonymous” saint, and he shared that if we think about it, the wise men were the first “Secret Santas” – they traveled a long distance to honor a homeless family, and they did it anonymously. They did not come to Bethlehem to receive recognition, only to bless, help, and honor the One.

In our world, you are either bringing darkness or light by your words and deeds. “Jesus is the Word of God incarnate – God’s desire to be known, to speak to us, to be heard by us, made flesh. And he is the Light of the world. May you hear this word, accept his light, and reflect his light this Christmas.” (p. 148)

Follow Up Questions...

- Hamilton reminds us Christmas is, on the traditional Christian calendar, a season continuing until the feast of Epiphany (January 6). In Western Christianity Epiphany commemorates the wise men’s visit to the child Jesus. How does the story of the wise men/magi resonate with you this Advent season? What do they represent to you each Christmas?

Scripture Focus – John 1:1-5, 9-14

1. In what ways are these verses “John’s account of Christmas”?
2. John claims God’s Word became a human being in Jesus (vs. 1, 14). The Greek word for *word* is “logos”. *Logos*, which means “word”, writes Hamilton, “also has the connotation of reasoning, wisdom or logic (p. 133). What do these definitions tell you about who John says Jesus is? What does thinking of Jesus as the Word of God mean to you?
3. “Christmas,” writes Hamilton, “is God’s response to both forms of darkness, the moral and the existential” (p. 127). How do you seek God overcoming the darkness in the world today?

Scripture Focus – Isaiah 58:1-10

1. How does God promise the people can experience light instead of darkness? What implications does God’s promise hold for church and society today?
2. How, specifically, is your congregation involved in the work to which God calls the people in this prophecy?
3. Hamilton writes that we sometimes ask why God has not done something about the darkness in our world, but God answers, “I did do something. I sent Jesus to be the light so you could see what to do” (pg. 140). How satisfying or unsatisfying do you find this answer? Why?

Scripture Focus – Matthew 2:7-12

1. How does the story of the magi in Matthew connect to the theme of light we discussed in John’s “Christmas story”?
2. What does the story say about who holds true power and authority? How?
3. For Hamilton, the story of the magi kneeling before Jesus illustrates the New Testament’s most commonly used title for Jesus and one of the most important: Lord. What does it mean for you to call Jesus *Lord*? How, specifically, do you “kneel before” him in your daily living? What treasures – tangible and otherwise – do you present to him for his use, as the magi opened their treasure chests?

Closing Activity...The Names for Jesus

During this study, we have explored many titles/names for Jesus: Messiah, King, Savior, Emmanuel, Word of God, Light, and Lord.

1. Which of these titles mean the most for you as a result of this study?
2. Which of these do you find challenging? Why?

My hope is that our study has helped shaped and develop the 2020 Advent Season for you. I hope this will carry over into your Christmas season. My assignment for you this Christmas season is to find a time in the next few days to experience “darkness”. In that darkness, bring a candle – real or electric – into that dark place. Experience the “light” for a few minutes.

Follow this activity up by reading Matthew 5:14-16. After reading these verses, read the following from Adam Hamilton:

“In our world, you’re either bringing darkness or light. By your words and deeds, you bring joy, love, and hope to others or you take it away. You bless and build up or you tear down and hurt. Life is either all about you or it is about others.”

Close this time by reading the following prayer that we will use to close our session tonight.

Closing Prayer (Read in Unison)

Dear Jesus, we acclaim you with many titles and names, but they all point us to your presence, power, and love. May we shine with your light not only at Christmas but at all times, in all our words and deeds. As you took on human flesh in a unique and decisive way so long ago, may you, in smaller but significant ways, take it on again in our flesh, that the world may see and give glory to your Father in heaven and ours. Amen.

Next Week

***“Incarnation”* Session Five**

Wednesday, December 30 6:30 PM Facebook Live

Reading – Epilogue in *“Incarnation”* – “Epiphany...Falling to Our Knees”

Scripture – Matthew 2:1-2, 8, 9-11 Luke 2:29-32

New Study...

Winter Bible Study: “Paul’s Prison Epistles – Colossians and Philemon”

An 8 Week Study on Two of Paul’s New Testament Letters

Begins Wednesday, January 6 at 6:30 PM on Facebook Live!