One of our family traditions during Christmas is driving around and seeing the Christmas lights decorating houses. We love all of the decorations but especially enjoy the lights. And we are not the only ones; a lot of people seem to enjoy doing this too. It appears that the lights attract many others too.

Also, as a family, our favorite Christmas decoration at our home is the Christmas Tree. We enjoy how it looks at night, in the dark, with the Christmas lights on. It is what makes it come to life.

I think that is on point about what Christmas is about. Whether it is lights hanging from the roof or decorating a Christmas tree, the Christmas lights are reminders of the One True Light that came to bring light and life into a world consumed by darkness. This Light, of course, is Jesus.

So, today on this first Sunday of Advent, we begin by learning the meaning of Christmas by talking about darkness and light.

Darkness. What is it? Natural darkness, like at night, is good and needed. At night, when the sun is down, and the light from the stars is dim, we can rest. Or when winter comes and the days grow short and dark, the earth can rest and renew as well.

But there are other kinds of darkness that are our concern today. The Bible speaks of two in particular. The darkness of the mind and the darkness of the spirit.

The darkness of the mind is the lack of knowledge, a state of confusion, and obliviousness. It can be said that it is amoral and is neither good nor evil; it is simply ignorant. When referring to not knowing something, the phrase “I am in the dark” explains this concept: “Did you know this was happening? No, I was kept in the dark.”

The way to overcome the darkness of the mind is by learning and being aware of what is happening around us. Like the picture of a lightbulb in or on top of our heads representing that process of insight and knowledge, the “Aha!” or “Wow!” moments when we come into the light, so to speak. (Kids always do this because they are learners and ask “Why?” a lot.)

Regarding spiritual darkness, the Bible refers to it as the absence of God in people. Just as light symbolizes holiness, goodness, grace, and hope, by contrast, darkness is also associated with evil, sin, and despair. A great example of that is 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The apostle Peter explains here the process of those who, once they know and believe in Jesus and experience his love and grace, are moved from a life of ignorance and despair into a life of revelation and hope, hence, “Called out of darkness into light.”

This is the story of Christmas. When Jesus came into the world, is when God said, “Let There Be Light!” in a world engulfed by darkness.

One of the prophecies from the prophet Isaiah about the coming of Jesus described this when he said in Isaiah 9:2, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” Isaiah was describing the human condition of ignorance and sinfulness in an unjust and suffering world and was prophesizing about the coming of “a great light” that would come to heal people.

Consider the story of the birth of Jesus, for example. In the Nativity story, we see Jesus being born at night, coming into this world in the middle of darkness, spiritual darkness, to be precise, as Isaiah depicted it. Shortly after Jesus was born, king Herod, afraid of this newborn king, persecuted families and slaughtered their young children. He unleashed his evilness on so many people as he tried to kill Jesus, as Matthew explains, “[H]e sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.”

However, not everything was overtaken by an evil darkness. In contrast, we see the shepherds, humble and despised by people like Herod, believing and seeking Jesus to worship him after the angels told them about his birth. One was moved by a dark willful evil, the others by light and hope.

The apostle John gives us a powerful insight into these two natures of light and darkness when he explains who Jesus is, what he did when he came, and how people respond to him. In John 1:1-5 he says,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

Then in John 3:17-21,

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

What John is saying is very revealing of God’s power and heart for us. Jesus did not come with judgment but healing. He came as a beacon of light to give life, not as a whip to punish us. In other words, God meets us right where we are, in our brokenness and in our viciousness, when we feel hopeless and even proud. God’s grace can heal even the most broken heart. That is the power of God, that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

Therefore, the story of Christmas is about Jesus coming to everyone, turning on the light switch so we would know where we walk and opening our minds to understand who God is and how much we are loved. Christmas is Jesus bringing God’s glory into our lives by shedding light (wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual insight) on all that God is and does for us. When we allow this to happen to us, those become the moments when God speaks into our lives, “Let There Be Light!” and we get the “Aha!” “Wow!” “Now I get it!” milestone experiences. That is when the blackouts in our lives are gone.

I found a video made by Switch Youth, a ministry dedicated to ministering 6-12th graders, that I thought was on point for this message as it explains how it is to be in darkness and light. Here it is, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbasW6YWcv4>

As this video explains, we know what it feels like when we are in a dark place. Those times when we experience discouragement, anger, or trauma. Sometimes due to our ignorance and bad choices, and other times due to willful sinfulness as perpetrators or victims. But most people don’t want darkness. If we could choose between light and darkness, without hesitation or a second thought, we would choose light.

However, our challenge is the process of letting go and letting in. Letting go of shame and unhealthy mindsets and behaviors, and letting in love, wisdom, and a new picture of what life is meant to be. It is challenging to choose light because it requires honesty, a change of direction, and commitment to learning new ways of being. We can’t just pray out the darkness; we need to walk consistently in the light. We can’t let in new life until we let go of the old.

My friends, the birth of Jesus is the testament that God is not against us but for us. Jesus said plainly that he did not come to condemn but to save us. This gives me hope as nothing else does. I don’t want death to prevail. I don’t want oppression to be perpetual. I don’t want illnesses to determine how we live and for how long. I don’t want hate to continue to tear us apart. I don’t want evil to remain unjudged. So, I choose light!

Here is the invitation and good news: Choosing light involves letting go of anger, resentment, shame, or guilt. Christmastime invites us to make peace and share friendships and meals together. Will you let Jesus bring light into your life? Let go of what keeps you in the dark and welcome all the light into your mind, heart, and everything you do. Like a Christmas tree, let Jesus put the lights on you.

And the good news is that regardless of how bad things may seem or how bad things could get, there is always hope, a light at the end of the tunnel. God is persistent, gracious, and loves everlasting. So, trust the grace and kindness of Jesus and allow yourself to be loved.

Let there be light in your life.