



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, December 30, 2007**  
*The First Sunday after Christmas Day*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin  
on  
John 1:1-18  
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*THE LIGHT SHINES ON, AND THE DARKNESS IS CLUELESS*

The first 18 verses of John—the gospel you just heard—are known as the “prologue” to his gospel. They are widely recognized as some of the most sublime writing, in the Bible or anywhere. Saint John’s prologue has been called a pearl, even as the gospel as a whole has been called the pearl of great price. Both Saint Augustine and Saint John Chrysostom said that it is beyond the power of a human being “to speak as John does in the Prologue.”<sup>1</sup> From *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God* all the way to *No one has ever seen God; but God the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known* we have richness and profundity of speech; you could spend your whole life on these 18 verses and still not exhaust the mystery onto which they open.

May I draw your attention to the 5th verse? In the Authorized Version it reads: *And the light shineth in darkness: and the darkness comprehended it not.* Or in the Revised Standard: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

A peculiar feature of this verse is the shift in verb tense. The first verb is present tense, “shineth,” “shines”; while the second verb is in the past: the darkness “comprehended it not” or “has not overcome it.” In Greek the first verb is a present progressive, referring to on-going or continuing action; the light *is shining* or *is going on shining*, whereas the second verb is in the tense called “aorist” which refers to completed action, something which has occurred and is done with: the darkness *did not comprehend* the light.

I say this is peculiar, because one might instead expect both the verbs to be past tense. That is, if this verse refers to Jesus’ coming, his living as a human being in the human world—events which indeed are referred to as the coming of light into the world: then the expectation would be that the light *shined* in the darkness and the darkness *did not overcome it*: that is to say, Jesus came and even though “darkness” attempted to do away with him by his crucifixion, darkness was not successful. But on the contrary: John affirms here a mystery which drives us deeper into the meaning of our lives today: Jesus who is the light of the world is still shining; he says, the light *shines on*; but the darkness has already done its worst and it failed to comprehend the light.

Think about it. The thing about light is that it always wins. Light always defeats darkness. If you are in the dark, all you have to do is turn on the light, and the darkness goes away.

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Brown, Anchor Bible commentary, 18.

. . . You were in great perplexity about what to do. For weeks you had pondered whether to seek a way out of the job you were in. Suddenly it was clear, and you were able to act with good conscience and personal integrity. You had been in darkness, but then the light came, and the darkness was gone.

It is ever that way: when clarity comes, confusion vanishes. It is never the case that when a lightbulb comes on, the darkness hangs on in the room. On the contrary, the thing about light is, it always defeats the darkness.

Nonetheless, the thing about our lives is: we live amidst a great deal of darkness and confusion and uncertainty. The random violence of the suicidal fanatic; the organized violence of war; the treachery of those we had accounted friends; the shallowness of our own motives and will: one sees darkness wherever one looks, overseas, or down the avenue, or into our heart. Darkness, it seems, is all around us, and seems to be as strong as ever, if even more so.

Yet the vision of faith is different. Faith says that darkness has had its day; darkness is spoken of in the past completed tense; darkness is, in truth, yesterday's news, yesterday's business, past history. Darkness came into the world in the third chapter of Genesis, when the primordial humans chose to descend into willfully asserted freedom rather than to ascend into the freedom of the children of God. Willfully asserted freedom is the descent of man into the world of darkness, for such freedom posits itself over against the way things really are. And then centuries, millennia, passed; and then light came into the world when the Son of God freely obeyed his Father and became fully human. Against him the darkness threw everything it had: lies, treachery, brutality, the machinery of empire, nails, humiliation, loss of all property, loss of face, and at the end of the excruciation loss of life: but the darkness *failed*. It tried everything but it failed to comprehend, to overcome, to master the light.

To live by faith is to keep straight what's in the past tense and what's in the present. Darkness, although it looks to be a potent force in the world as we know it, is in fact a spent force, something that did its best to destroy the light and failed decisively and for ever. And light, which we only glimpse in its full clarity and that only from time to time, is in fact still shining, and will be shining on, on and on unto the end of all things. Which is to say, where we live, right now, *the light is shining in the darkness*.

The failure of darkness is the failure to understand the light. The Greek word carries a breadth of meaning. As I noted earlier, the Revised Standard Version says that the darkness *did not overcome* the light. Which is to say that there was some sort of struggle, and the darkness was too weak. The King James, however, says the darkness *failed to comprehend* the light. To comprehend is to get your grasp around, it is to encircle and to conquer that way; but it is also to understand. And the awesome thing (to us) is that not only was darkness unable to defeat light; darkness never even *understood* the light.

It never understood why she risked her career to speak the truth.

It never understood why he extended care, at such cost, to one who could give him nothing in return.

It never understood why he was willing to die.

In fact, it still doesn't understand that. Here we are, twenty centuries later, and the darkness is as clueless as ever. All the great literature of the world, all the stories of self-surrender or self-risking which lift our heart and make us glad—darkness cannot understand them. "Would not that money have been better used elsewhere?" it says. "Should not that ointment have been sold and given to the poor?"

Darkness trades in the currency of fear. It manipulates the shadows, working our attention away from the light of reality. The power of innuendo, the knowing half-wink, the infinitely extended striptease of human flesh in advertising; gossip, lies; and behind it, the power of the group, the fear of not blowing with the wind of the times. Sin seems so strong, so omnipresent, so much a part of the grain of things; but it is actually next to nothing. All we need, sometimes, is one person to let out a hearty laugh, or one person to speak a quiet demurral; a word of truth, and suddenly the light is on, and where are the shadows now? O the irony of God! O the great laughter of God! Death, where is thy victory? Grave, where is thy sting? The babe has been born in Bethlehem, and Christ has risen from the dead, and the light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness—poor, pathetic, uncomprehending darkness—the darkness has lost, and will never understand it.