

Out of Silent Darkness
Christmas Day: December 25, 2010
John 1:1-14; Isaiah 52:7-10

It's almost been cold enough this December for the old North Country legend to be true: It can get so cold that words come out of your mouth still frozen. They must be thrown in a frying pan and sautéed into sentences. *That* sure gives the phrase "heated argument" a whole new meaning! What if it were true? Imagine the silence, unbroken except by the glassy tinkle of icy nouns, verbs and adjectives scattering on the snow. Think of the crazy-quilt confusion that would ensue if these words weren't all recovered, fried up, and re-assembled in the correct sequence. What if meaningful communication depended upon a sauté chef, a linguistic short-order cook, who alone could ensure comprehension? How strange and precious words would be if this were the only means by which they could be heard and understood! How astounding the first thawed word would have seemed as it sizzled into sound.

It's probably easier to imagine the pitch darkness of a starless night or windowless room. There are few things so disorienting as absolute blackness. Direction, distance, and landmarks become meaningless words. In such circumstances, most folks hallucinate; it's as if the human brain takes offense at such an absolute void. Even the feeblest glimmer of light would, in such blackness, be a beacon, a lighthouse, a

compass-star to orient and guide. That one spark, a mere photon, decrees that darkness is not absolute. "One little gleam subdues it!"

When writers of Scripture talk about sin, rebellion, and alienation from God and one another, they cast about for images that convey the urgency and depth of their insights. *Darkness* is a favorite word. Mind you, they don't mean plain old nightfall, much less skin tone or hair color. For people who had no word to describe sheer nothingness, absolute non-being, and who lacked even a way of enumerating "zero," *darkness* was a powerful word which hinted at something dreadful: separation from God, who is the sole source of life, goodness, and meaning. Dwelling in such darkness even now is a kind of living death; to imagine (if it is even possible to imagine) continuing in that darkness forever could cause terror, madness, and despair. Anyone who's been plunged into depression or bereavement, or has experienced the horrors of war or abuse, knows something of such darkness. Anyone who's wrestled with addiction; guilt; or shameful thoughts, words or deeds, is familiar with it. And they know how terrifying it can be.

Another potent image in Scripture is silence, or mere noise. From the silence preceding the world-creating Word, to the cacophony of Babel's proud tower, to the silence of the grave from which, the Psalmist laments, no praise sounds to God, to the cries and wails of the kings of the earth and the demons of hell as they behold the Lord who

comes as righteous judge, our fallen world is sketched in Scripture as a place where words - *real*/words, true words that give life, meaning and communion - are nearly impossible. They are either frozen into sinful silence, or fried up into a scrambled, poisonous mess of pottage.

Again, we don't have to look far for confirmation of this. Every divorce decree, counselor's office, and courtroom bear witness to it. Every slammed door, vicious taunt, and icy "silent treatment" testifies to Scripture's truth: silence - or sheer noisy confusion - is the aural equivalent of the thick darkness that envelops those who have become separated and estranged from God, and from one another.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was 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 overcome it.

As St. John reflects on the divine remedy to the human condition, he unites two images that stand over and against those terrible images of silence and darkness. In the beginning was the *Word*: the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Above the silence and dark formlessness of non-being, as the Spirit hovered, God the Father spoke

his Son, his Word; and through him, light and life sprang into being; and with them came meaning, order, relationship, and beauty.

And once again, into this world now so darkened, silenced and confused by the power and the effects of sin, evil, and death, the Word is spoken and the Light shines in our darkness, which shall never overcome it. That Word comes *to us*: not as some incomprehensibly grand, esoteric "word of power". No, he comes as that most commonplace of miracles, a newborn baby who grows into a man. That Word made flesh, Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, dwells amongst ordinary people, speaking the grandest words of power in the simplest words imaginable: Rise up, my child; your sins are forgiven. I am the bread of life; feed on me. I am the way, the truth and the life; follow me. I am the Good Shepherd; listen to my voice. I am the water of life; drink your fill of me. I am the true vine; abide in me even as I abide in my Father. I am the light of the world; walk in my light.

That Word comes to shed light on all that is dark, distorted, diseased and dead in us. That light can be painful to eyes and hearts unused to the holiness and purity of God; so in mercy, he attenuates that light, coming as a baby, approachable and appealing. He comes as a simple rabbi, whom one might debate and doubt - or believe and follow. He veils his glory with a Cross, so eyes shrouded with death and despair

might not be overwhelmed, but rather take heart and, by its light, see the outline of our salvation, hope, road, and eternal home.

That Word which created, and which re-creates, the world; that Light by which every nation and person might forever walk, comes to us, here, today - not only because it is the yearly celebration of Christ's Nativity, but because our Lord Emmanuel has promised to come to us and abide with us, forever and always. He is God's Word, the primal Gospel; he is the Light by which all creation is illumined and transformed - and he comes *to us*, in plain English words, through that humble water-bath and in this simple meal. He comes; and something astounding happens because he does.

He doesn't just speak words of power, life, forgiveness and love *to us*; he permits himself to be spoken *through us*, to one another, to the world. He makes us into his own "linguistic short order cooks" so that we might speak a real and living word into the icy silences and Babel sounds of sin-fractured souls. He, through a miracle as vast as his incarnation in Bethlehem, is God's Word enfleshed *in us*, spoken *by us*, to create comprehension and communion, blessing and beauty, once again as on the first days of all of creation. For the Word is made flesh and dwells among *us*, full of grace and truth, so that the prophet's words might be fulfilled not only in our hearing but in our very flesh: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger*

who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels (that would be US!) lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

And that Word who is Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, doesn't just shine *upon* us, to brighten and cheer our hearts; guide our faltering footsteps; and give us courage to walk through the shadowed lands of sorrow, sin, and suffering. He also *fills us* with his light, making us into lanterns, torches, lighthouses - and yes, even flickering, dimly burning candles - to shine his radiance in the world's darkness.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it. Even one little gleam, one little Word, subdues it. The smallest speck of God's light declares that darkness is not absolute. May "the dear Christ" shine within us today, and may others look at our lives and listen to our words, and with us exclaim, The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. The Word HAS become flesh and lived among us, and we HAVE seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth! AMEN!