

WHEN THE BALL DROPS: Recognizing the Darkness

John 1:1-18

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I.

It's the beginning of a new year, a season when many of us reflect on the highs and lows of the past twelve months and what we hope the new year will bring. For some, the holidays were filled with joy and connection. But for others, the season only magnified a painful reality: loneliness. Even surrounded by crowds, whether at Times Square or in our own families, loneliness can grip our hearts and make us feel invisible. Solitude and being alone can be refreshing, but loneliness—that profound ache of isolation—is deeper and more painful.

A friend once told me a story about attending a party during the holidays. She was surrounded by laughter and conversation, yet she felt invisible. She described the ache of being unseen—a profound loneliness that cut deeper than mere solitude. Perhaps you've felt this, too—at a party, in the workplace, or even in the pews of our church.

Loneliness is more than being alone. It's the painful sense of isolation, the feeling that no one sees, loves, or understands you. It can strike the 90-year-old in a care facility and the 15-year-old who feels misunderstood. It's the byproduct of faking joy when your heart is heavy, the grief that stops you in your tracks while the world moves on, or the silent struggles we carry in health, relationships, or finances. Loneliness is everywhere.

Sue Borne, producer of *The Age of Loneliness*, captures this truth: "We're all a bit scared of loneliness... of being left, of not being loved or needed." Studies confirm this fear. The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, called loneliness an epidemic, saying in an 82-page report released in 2023 that it's as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹ But loneliness doesn't just harm our bodies; it isolates our spirits and distorts our view of ourselves, others, and even God. Loneliness takes life from us, and as a church with a mission to lead people into LIFE-GIVING relationships with Christ and others, we must recognize the darkness and help shine the light of Christ on it.

II.

Just as the New Year promises a fresh start, the gospel of John begins with powerful hope that cuts through the darkness of loneliness. "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... 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." (1-5)

This passage declares that God's light pierces the darkness of loneliness. From the beginning, God has been relational—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect unity. And because we are made in God's image, we, too, are designed for relationships.

At Christmas, we celebrate that God did not remain distant but entered our world to bring life and light to us. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." This relational God came into our world, putting on flesh to be with us — offering hope to those in darkness, including the darkness of loneliness. Darkness in Scripture often symbolizes confusion, fear, and separation. When we're lonely, we can't see clearly, so we retreat further into isolation, perpetuating the cycle of loneliness. Loneliness clouds our perspective and whispers lies: "You're not worthy of love. No one cares about you. Even God has forgotten you."

But the good news of this season is that God has not forgotten us. This is the miracle of the Incarnation: God didn't stay distant or detached. Instead, God stepped into our humanity, experiencing our joys and sorrows and speaking to our loneliness. Jesus' ministry was one of connection. He sought out the marginalized, the unseen, the forgotten. Consider the story of Zacchaeus, the lonely tax collector, or the Samaritan woman at the well, isolated by her community. Jesus brought light and life to them both, showing us that God's love reaches into the darkest corners.

III.

One of the most beautiful examples of God's light guiding people is the story of the magi in our Christmas story. These wise men studied the heavens and the stars, and one night, they saw a bright star unlike any other. This star led them through the darkness to the Christ child. We don't know how magi came, but we know of three gifts given to Jesus — gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Imagine their journey. They left the familiarity of their homeland, navigating uncertainty, danger, and the threat of an insecure and cruel King Herod, all because they trusted the light. When they arrived, their reward wasn't riches or status but the presence of Jesus. Upon finding Jesus, they worshipped him and presented their gifts. The star was God's way of guiding them to hope and salvation for themselves and the world.

Sometimes, these stars are people in our lives who guide us to Christ through their kindness, encouragement, and even just their presence. And sometimes, we are called to be the stars, shining the light of Christ for others.

A star like David Kormann, who drove 30 minutes to Fulton to deliver a Christmas poinsettia from our Homebound and Senior Adult Ministries, and a beautiful pillow from our Piecemakers quilting group to one of our members who is in assisted living. She read every word of the Christmas Card, asked about people here, and smiled ear to ear in her photos with her Christmas gifts. When David asked her if her church could do anything for her, she said, "Can I get a hug?" And David gave and received the best hug. David was a star of light, reminding this sweet woman that she was not forgotten; she wasn't alone. Along with David, 12 other volunteers conducted 46 personal visits in December to those precious people homebound due to health.

There are stars like Pam Wheeler and Marcia Sebourne who open their home, hearts, and holidays to a member who has experienced significant loss this year in her family. Pam and Marcia know about significant loss as widows and have become light to each other out of their shared grief. While they've received light, they have also chosen to reflect it to others, like this woman whose holiday would have been far less bright without them. Pam and Marcia's presence is a light in this woman's darkness, reminding her she is not forgotten.

There are stars like Brian Rodden, who made a young man from our shelter for the unhoused last year feel welcome here. In his Christmas card this year to Brian, the man thanked Brian for making him comfortable enough on his first day at worship that he stayed. This man got a good job that requires him to work on Sundays, but he has sent thank you cards to Brian, me, this church, and the leadership of the Room at the Inn, the cold weather shelter for the homeless we host in our gym. Brian was a star in this young man's darkness.

You are stars, too, First Baptist. Your giving and volunteer time have allowed us to open our doors and provide shelter, meals, and companionship, especially on horrible winter days like today. For many guests, the church isn't just a building; it is a star guiding them to hope, a room at the inn. One guest shared, "I've felt invisible for years, but here, I'm seen. I'm loved." This church is the embodiment of Jesus—light in the flesh.

There are so many stars among us. I could recite a long list of names and share stories more numerous than the snowflakes falling today of those among this congregation who have been and are a light to others. Thank you for being a light that overcomes the darkness of loneliness. Thank you for being the star that points others to Jesus.

V.

Just as the magi followed the star to Jesus, we are invited to follow the light of Christ. If you're in a season of loneliness, know this: God sees you. The light of Christ shines for you, offering hope and connection. Let the magi's journey inspire you to follow the light—to trust God's guidance even in the darkness to help you find your way to Jesus and receive the incredible gift of his presence.

Sometimes, we follow the star; sometimes, we are the star. The magi's journey also reminds us that following Christ's light calls us to action.

The Surgeon General's report on the epidemic of loneliness also offers practical wisdom on how to be light and receive the light of connection: "Answer that phone call from a friend. Make time to share a meal. Listen without distraction. Perform an act of service. Express yourself authentically."ⁱⁱ These small acts can break the cycle of isolation and build connections. Connecting with others is one of the most powerful ways to combat loneliness. In Acts 2, we see the early Church as a vibrant community where people shared meals, prayed together, and met each other's needs. That's what the Church is meant to be: a community where no one feels unseen or unloved.

Just a couple of Sundays ago, some of our members helped a family move on short notice during a tough time. They carved out a few hours on a Sunday afternoon to be light in the darkness, to be stars, reminding this family they are loved and seen. They did more than lift boxes. They lifted spirits and lightened heavy burdens.

Imagine a church where every person who enters feels truly seen, a community where no one bears their burdens alone, and the love of Christ radiates through every interaction. Picture neighbors reaching out to one another, sharing meals, offering hugs, and extending grace. Envision a family of faith that shines so brightly that it becomes a beacon of hope for the lonely and lost—a place where the light of Christ pushes back every shadow. This is the future God calls us to create together.

Sometimes, we follow the star; sometimes, we are the star. But we can't be the star unless we follow the star. That's where we get our light to share – the light of Christ.

The ball has dropped on a new year, but the light of Christ is rising. If you're in a season of loneliness, God sees you. You are not alone. Jesus is the light that shines in our darkness, the hope that reaches into our loneliness, and the love that never lets us go. Call out to him. Jesus still dwells among us.

And for those in whom the light of Christ dwells, let's carry the light of Christ together into the world, offering hope and love to all who feel lost and unseen. Just as Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, your act of reaching out can make someone feel seen. Just as Jesus included the excluded woman at the well in his mission, your act of welcome can make someone feel they belong.

Thank you for being a light that overcomes the darkness of loneliness. Thank you for being the star that points others to Jesus. May we seek the light that shines in the darkness, even the darkness of loneliness. May we shine so brightly that we become a beacon of hope for the lonely and lost—a place where the light of Christ pushes back every shadow. Follow the star. Be the star for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

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