



Sermon God in our Flesh

It was definitely Christmas in July, and I'd never been so grateful for the gift of light in my life!

Wind Cave National Park is located just south of Custer, South Dakota. It's visited by thousands of people every year who take either the stairs or the elevator deep into the vast underground network of passageways. If you like spelunking, Wind Cave National Park is for you. It's one of the world's largest cave systems, with more than 136 miles of mapped underground passage ways.

This was the first destination on a vacation that our family took several summers ago. We signed up for a tour that would carry us into what seemed like the center of the earth, by way of an elevator, to the underground destination ironically named "Garden of Eden." That turned out to be a bit of a misnomer.

You probably need to know that I have a touch of claustrophobia due, in large part, to getting stuck in elevators on a couple of occasions: once on a First Light Tour in Seattle with, oh, 25 students in an elevator that was built to handle about half of that, and again in a parking garage in St. Paul after a Minnesota Wild hockey game with some rowdy fans. Suffice it to say that when I feel closed in, a cold sweat isn't far behind.

After doing some mental gymnastics to get ready for the tour, Nancy Lee and I, and our kids, stepped into the brightly lit and mirrored elevator with a number of other tourists. As the mirrored doors closed, I had the first look at myself, along with everyone else in the elevator. It was an awkward moment in a completely mirrored box, with everyone was sort of going back and forth between looking at themselves and looking at everyone else. When I looked at myself, I couldn't help but notice how pasty-white I was in that tight little elevator.

As the elevator descended, the park ranger, our guide for the tour, gave us all kinds of information that didn't help someone dealing with claustrophobia: how the cave was discovered, how deep into the earth's crust we were going, how many billions of tons of earth were on top of us, how an earthquake just a few years previous had been felt by those in the cave, and how many people had gotten lost and died after becoming disoriented in the vast cave system. After only a few seconds, it seemed like we had been in the elevator forever.

Finally, the elevator stopped, and in those few milliseconds that followed, I just prayed: "Open! Open! Please open!" When the elevator door finally did open, I could hardly move. I stood there for a few moments, collecting my courage, staring at the low ceiling of stalagmites and stalactites. I thought, "Oh man, this is all going to just cave in at any moment."

Led by the ranger's high-powered flashlight, we made our way to the Garden of Eden, where we sat on some benches in a small

amphitheater. The ranger announced that, in a few moments, she was going to turn off her flashlight, so we should get comfortable. She added that she was going to leave the light off for a few minutes so that we could adjust to the darkness.

Finally, she did what she said she was going to do: she turned off her light, and we sat there as the darkness enveloped us. And then the park ranger said something that has stuck with me to this day. "Well, friends," she said, "you probably know by now that we could sit here until next Thursday afternoon and still not be able to see one thing, not even your hand right in front of your face."

And, of course, at that moment, everyone put their hands up in front of their faces. Sure enough, nothing. And the thought of sitting there until next Thursday started to get to me. The darkness was gigantic, pervasive, enveloping, and very unfriendly. At that moment it occurred to me that I had no idea which way to run. Yelling and screaming hysterically would be the most unmanly thing I'd do all day.

And then I remembered that I had a watch. And my watch was a Timex, which means it had a light on it! I had a Timex Indiglo! I sat there with my wrist in my face, soaking up that Indiglo light. Christmas in July!

Christmas is about a lot of things, but if it's anything at all, it's about light – the light of Jesus Christ, God in our flesh, coming into the world. It's the announcement once again that God has invaded our darkness with the light of his son, Jesus. It's the good news that God has stepped into our apprehension and fear with the gift of love in Jesus Christ who casts out all fear. It's the gift of God in human form, the form of the Christ child who is the promise of new life.

On a day when opening gifts is the preferred method of exploration, I'd like to open four little gifts with you. John's Gospel, with all of its remarkable poetry, opens the possibility of a bright future by taking us all the way back, back to the beginning. John's opening phrase takes us all the way back to the very beginning. And anyone with even a sideways connection to Scripture will recognize the words "in the beginning..." as having something to do with something very gigantic. It's very gigantic, very pervasive, very enveloping, and very connected to a God who created, who still creates and who will continue to create light in the midst of darkness, hope in the midst of despair, life in the midst of death.

The phrase "in the beginning..." is a way of understanding the good news: from some point (linearly speaking), God desired to show up in the lives of every human being on the planet. The word "beginning" points to newness: new life, new hope, new dawn, and new possibilities. God's beginning is rooted in God's vision for the world: life and hope and promise, through Jesus Christ.

There is another gift that that needs to be unwrapped. This morning we unwrap the Word, the Word made flesh. The Word, as John's Gospel echoes through the centuries, that was, and is! The Word that is the promise of life from a loving God, the Word that was God from the beginning.

The Word in Genesis 1 is both the raw power of God's creative force, calling into being that which was not yet. Something out of nothing; indeed, everything out of nothing. This Word is the announcement of light in our darkness, order in our chaos. But this Word is also the real, living, breathing, flesh-on-bones, blood-in-veins, beard-on-a-face, fire-in-the-belly presence of God himself in Jesus Christ who brings the gentle word of hope and promise, grace and mercy. That is what we unwrap at Christmas: the good news that God is not "somewhere out there," but that God is now here, right here among us. And to "prove" that, the Word bears the name "Immanuel" so that, looking at this Living Word, we know that God is with us.

And because God is with us, we can open a third gift: the gift of life itself. John's Christmas poem continues: "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 ..."

I got the call that Bruce had dropped dead of a heart attack. I jumped in my car and drove to the house where I found Bruce's wife, Diane, stunned and wondering how she would tell her two girls, both under the age of 10. At some point in the next several hours, as the reality of Bruce's death sank in, Diane turned to me and said, "I don't know how I'm going to get through this next week. I don't think I have what it's going to take."

"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 ..."

You know that phrase: "Life goes on ..."? There are moments in life when we wonder about that. How does life go on? How does life go on in the midst of brokenness and death?

The announcement of Christmas is that God has given us the promise of life in Jesus Christ, the promise that life does, indeed go on! A month after Bruce's memorial service, Diane and I sat together again, and I heard her say that she didn't know how life would go on without Bruce. And as deeply difficult as it was, she realized as she looked back into the darkness of that previous month that the promise of Christ's presence in death had already begun to blow new life back into her, and into her two girls.

And that, of course, is the gift of light in the midst of darkness that brings joy and celebration. "And the life was the light of all people."

The best Christmas gift I ever got? Well, other than that little Indiglo moment in that cave? My dad was a pilot for 26 years in the United States Navy. I knew as a kid what it was like to say goodbye to my dad as he deployed, and, in those days, literally not knowing where in the world he was going, or when he would be coming home. For months on end, my mom would measure his absence by holidays in between to make the separation seem shorter: "Only two more major holidays before Gene comes home."

And so imagine the sheer delight when, on a cold winter evening, on the way home from dinner at a pizza joint just outside of McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, I said to my mom, "Wouldn't it be great if, when we turned the corner on our street, we saw daddy's car parked in front of the house?"

The aching silence filled with thoughts of "wouldn't it be great if ..." was, in one instant, completely shattered. As we turned that last corner onto our street, the headlights on our car met the taillights of my dad's 1964 American Motors Rambler Ambassador station wagon parked in front of our house!

Oh ... my gosh! He was home! My mom hit the gas so hard that the tires screeched, and I was pressed back into the seat and held there by G-forces beyond my control. With the car horn blaring, tires screeching, and both of us screaming with sheer delight, those tail lights flooded our hearts with celebration! We piled out of the car, ran through the yard, opened the door, and burst into the house and into the arms of my dad.

Flesh and blood. He was there, fully present and alive. I could touch him, see him, smell him, and hear him! Light brought hope back to life, because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That's Christmas: the promise that God shows up in the flesh, the Word made flesh, Jesus, light in our darkness, God in our flesh, life in our death, the gift of Christmas that we open today and every day.