**John 1:1-18 December 24, 2019 (Christmas Eve)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 The words of John chapter 1, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” With this only being our families second Christmas in the area we haven’t gotten to experience all of the traditions of Manistee County our entire lives like some of you have. But so far we are 2 for 2 in driving through Sparkle in the Park down the road in Bear Lake. There is something about seeing all the lights that brings out the wonder and joy of the Christmas season. This park, that otherwise would sit in darkness, is illuminated with lights. So many lights that everywhere you look it is lit up and glowing. I even appreciate that after Christmas Day, till the end of the year you can go and see the lights, and bask in the glow of the continued Christmas season.

 The light shines in the darkness. You don’t have to tell us that here at Trinity Lutheran Church in Onekama. All throughout the year the light of the cross shines out in the darkness, out over Portage Lake as a beacon to our community, reflecting the light of the cross of salvation to everyone who sees it. Even in the thickest darkness, you can look out and see the light of the cross, which is true in a literal way for our sanctuary and also is true in our lives of sin. For the darkness is thick and smothering when it comes to sin, and you need the strongest of lights, the only true light, to overcome it.

 The cheap light won’t do, but sadly disposable and cheap is a good way to describe this wonderful time of year. It is found in our Old Testament lesson for tonight, from Isaiah chapter 52 this verse of imperative command in verse 9, “Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem.” It is a call to the picture of glory in Revelation, where every creature sings praise whether it be man, or beast. It is a call for us to give thanks to God in all circumstances and make a joyful *noise* unto the Lord, meaning that anyone who is self-conscious, and embarrassed about their ability to sing or lack thereof should check it at the door. This is not a concert hall, this isn’t a venue where the most classically trained come to show off their voices, this is a place of worship to our God who calls on even the waste places to sing songs of praise to the only true God. Especially at the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. I hope that you find, at the very least on this day, the courage and the joy to sing songs together with your brothers and sisters in Christ here tonight, and I encourage you to make a joyful noise to the Lord not just tonight but at every opportunity to worship.

 Hear again these words. “Sing, you waste places.” It got me thinking about the sheer amount of waste that Christmas generates. I’m not just talking about the wrapping paper that’s thrown away, I mean all of it. The boxes that toys and other items come in that are thrown away, the decorations that are discarded, the sheer number of plastic utensils and paper cups at a Christmas party that fill up bag after bag of waste. The dump grows during Christmas time, with worn out toys that are replaced with new ones. When a bulb burns out and the strand doesn’t work, we throw it away and buy a new one. Waste accumulating, that’s a key tradition of Christmas. We live in a world of waste.

 And it highlights the fleeting joy of Christmas if we all we focus on is the stuff. Because in about 24 hours from now, at 7:30ish on December 25th, Christmas Day, my guess is that if you have Christmas presents currently under your tree right now, all you will have around your tree, is waste. All you will have in the kitchen, is dirty dishes and bones of a meal that has been devoured. Trash bags that are full and need to be taken to the dump. It reminds me of the greatest depiction of a secular celebration of Christmas, which can be found in Charles Dickens, “A Christmas Carol.” Scrooge is met by the second of the ghosts, the Ghost of Christmas Present, who is a huge, jolly, jovial man who whisks him away and shows him Christmas celebrations that were taking place in the present. His introduction is done with a room full of lights, life, excitement, just like the joy of Christmas morning when everything is ready and the celebration is only beginning. But by the end of the day this huge, strong, man, has grown weak. He sits hunched over, the life leaving his face, as the clock ticks to midnight, and he falls over, dead. The room has gone from lights and life, to darkness, as the final ghost of Christmas future descends upon Scrooge in a dark robe, to show him a dark fate.

 My dear friends, I am not here to ruin your Christmas mood. I am not here to extinguish the life of your fun and celebrations, I’m simply here to lead you to the true light of all mankind. The true light that isn’t cheap, and the true light that won’t be overcome by the darkness. Because the light that is given by seeing Christmas as only a one-day sprint of happiness is like the light that is given off by a 4th of July sparkler. It’s here for a moment and gone. It provides no lasting light; it gives off no lasting warmth. The darkness quickly overcomes it. What’s left behind is just waste.

 You won’t find lasting happiness and a true joy in things, possessions, store bought items and celebrations that focus only on the “holiday” season. You won’t find lasting joy in yourself because deep down in your heart is the darkness of sin, and you have a nature that is drawn to that darkness. No one day can destroy that. A life lived to self can’t find lasting joy, peace, and happiness. It’s not under a tree, it’s not wrapped in a gift, it’s not here in us, but out in Him, the very Son of God who came to us, as a baby, born in a manger, in Bethlehem.

 “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” The life, was the light. His life, begun as a baby, an infant, born to a virgin and a carpenter, hailed by shepherds on the night he was born, his life is now your life. That’s the gift God gives to you not in a stocking, not wrapped under a tree, but covered in the evidence of his love for you as he hangs bleeding on a cross. He is born to die, not for his own mistakes, but to dispel the darkness of your heart and your mind and your actions. He is born to die as the perfect lamb of sacrifice for the sins of the entire world. He is born to die in your place as your Savior. This gift isn’t fleeting, or cheap, it’s not disposable and it doesn’t wear out. This is a lasting and solid concrete truth that you are saved by His works and not your own.

 That’s where the lasting joy of Christmas is found, in His sacrifice and in the recognition of who he truly is: the Son of God. Because the darkness of sin can overcome anything we throw at it from ourselves. We can try to fight it off with distractions and celebrations and making our “best life” here on Earth in what we do, but the darkness continues to grow and work against the light in order to destroy it. It is only in the true light, the light of the world, Jesus Christ, that the darkness is overcome and destroyed. And this season emphasizes that, and reflects that. We put up lights on our houses to shine in the midst of the darkness in a cold and dreary season of the year to give us hope to face the challenges of the new year. Tonight, you will hold a light in your hands, as the other lights are turned off, and we will sing together of the child who “sleeps in heavenly peace.” And also hear of the “radiant beams from HIs Holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace.” We hold a light, and sing of the light which is our life.

 Because the summary of Christmas is this truth found in John chapter 1, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Merry Christmas and God bless your celebration of the true, lasting, light of the world, Jesus Christ, not just for tonight, and not even just for Christmas Day. Stay in the light of the season of Christmas, come back and celebrate on December 29th, the first Sunday after Christmas. While the rest of the world moves on in a rush to the next thing, stay with Christmas and leave the lights up, go see the lights again in the park, and remember the true light of the world which is your life because it drives away the darkness of your sin.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.