

- Thank you, Dr. Tucker for your welcome this morning. I am delighted to share in this service with you on this Sunday after Christmas. It's been an interesting experience, to spend the Advent and Christmas season here in the United States. It's so cold and dark certainly the climate here provides a most appropriate backdrop for the Christmas light and helps illuminate the truth of the message of this season that the light shines in the darkness. However, during this Sunday in Australia, as on Christmas Day, many who participated in morning worship would have spent the rest of the day and perhaps much of the evening, at the beach or in some other summer activity. Yes? Christmas for us, comes in the time of light, in mid-summer. As your dean commented in his sermon that last Christmas Eve, we in Australia, have an upside down Christmas. This presents some logistical problems, such as having to wait until 9:30 or 10 o'clock in the evening before we can have our carols by candlelight service, and having to exercise our imagination to gain meaning from many of those carols, with their references to in the bleak mid-winter, snow on snow. But perhaps most of all is the theological or faith challenge. How are we to celebrate the coming of the light when it is light already? A not dissimilar issue faces us, at Easter time, which comes of course in our autumn, or fall. And therefore, all the metaphors of new life and nature, which is, which have been utilized by traditional theology, proclaiming the new life of Christ's resurrection, are contrary to what we experience in our climate. Thus, I live in a country, where the climate is at odds with theology. Or remembering, that within a very few years, there are likely to be more Christians living south of the Equator, than north of it. Perhaps, traditional theology is at odds with the climate. These comments may help you understand why the themes of light and darkness, were prominent in my mind, as I reflected upon our gospel reading from Luke, for this Sunday after Christmas. For example, was it cold and dark or warm and sunny outside when Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus went to the temple that day as Luke describes. We have always tended to assume that it was cold and dark, befitting a Palestine winter. But of course, the decision to celebrate the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December, was made by the church in the Northern Hemisphere, many years after the event, to replace an existing mid-winter festival. There is no mention in Luke, that it was winter, at the time of the birth of Jesus. And to hear this story as I have for 50 years, indeed just over 50 years, with the sun shining brightly outside, and the prospect of an afternoon at the beach ahead of me, makes a big difference to how one understands and receives Luke's story. Is this time following Christmas, one of light or of darkness? There is the shade, if not the darkness of the letdown we invariably experience following the brightness of our Christmas celebrations. As your dean has commented, this Sunday signals the ordinary resumption of life after the grand intrusion of the joy of the Christmas message. There are also other ways in which we can understand the twin themes of light and darkness to be present in our lives today and also in our gospel story. Much of the light comes from the understated beauty of this story from Luke. Here, with Mary and Joseph following the traditions of the Jewish law, in bringing their first born to be presented at the temple, we catch one of the few glimpses in the New Testament given us of how the ordinary people of that time lived out their religious commitment. I always remember the comment made to me by my Australian friend and colleague, Robert Banks, now teaching at Fuller Seminary. Robert remarked saying he wondered quite often how the ordinary folk, the Bible-believing, or scripture and law-believing Jewish folk at the time of of of Jesus, lived out their religious commitment. Today we catch a glimpse of this. For Mary and Joseph,

who were simple folk, only able to offer the sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons, as they could not afford a lamb, and their faithful obedience to the law was an expression of their joy and praise of God, and not an unremitting demand placed upon them. And we meet two other people of faith, Simeon and Anna, who each in their own way provide testimony to the enduring power of faithfulness and the faithful power of endurance. Their lives and witness radiate a light, not a blinding light, but one of graceful radiance. With Simeon's poignant words continuing to enter our lives through the words of the liturgy, "Lord, now let us thou thy servant, "depart in peace, according to thy word. "For mine eyes had seen thy salvation." Then there was Anna, a very old widow, who also belonged to the simple folk of faith of the time. Indeed, such was the strength, and constancy of her piety, today we would say spirituality, that we are told that she never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer, night and day. We are reminded of the Annas in our lives. Of the people of faith, indeed many of them being older women, whose prayers for us continue to support and sustain us, even without our knowledge. Yes, the light of their faithfulness often illuminates the darkness we experience. And our gospel story today ends in the brightness of the knowledge that after Mary and Joseph finished all that was required by the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth, and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. All the things that we would wish for our children, were given to the young lad, Jesus. Physical strength, wisdom of heart and mind, and being the recipient of God's gracious favor. Yes, the ordinary resumption of life was filled with the promise given by the Grand Intrusion. The light shines in the darkness. But as we have all heard, within the brightness of this poignant story, are the shades of darkness. For we note that following Simeon's moving words, that we now know as the Nunc dimittis, come his words to Mary the mother, "This child is destined for the falling and rising "of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will "be opposed so that the inner thoughts "of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce "your own soul too." Hearing these words, a dark cloud shades the brightness of the blessing, at that moment there in the temple for the parents, especially Mary the mother, for the child, knowing that he will be opposed by many and have the sharpness of the sword pierce his soul too, and for us too, as we remember the dark clouds amidst the light of the Christmas blessings, of the vacant seat around our Christmas meal tables because of the death of a parent or grandparent, or because of separation from children or their spouses, of the words spoken in haste and anger as old family resentments resurfaced, of the dark thoughts and feelings we harbored amidst the Christmas lights. And also, there is that sense that we may be experiencing today, of the mundaneness of our life ahead, now that the brightness and joy of the grand intrusion of Christmas is finished. Whilst this may not be a black cloud, and more like a feeling of flatness, nevertheless, it brings its own sense of a darker shade into our life. Now, I realize that many preachers throughout the world will be emphasizing this point today: That already within the brightness of the message of Christmas, are contained glimpses of the darkness of the suffering and death which the Christ child is to experience. It's only right and proper that this emphasis be made. It's not simply a form of psychological reality testing, okay, you've had your time of celebration, now back to the real world. No, more profoundly, it directs us to the heart of the truth and promise of the Christmas message. For I believe, that the Christian message affirmed in our gospel reading today is that darkness is always present in our lives on Earth. It is real, sometimes the result of our own perversity, sometimes the result of the incomprehensible forces of evil and suffering, always a dark mystery. Indeed I wish to suggest that darkness is a constituent part or a constant companion of our trust of God in Christ. Remember to the one who can rightly be called the true model of faith, to Mary, these words were given, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." What was true for Mary is also true for us. Light and

shade are part and parcel of our life here as Christians on Earth. My father was an art teacher. He used to emphasize in his classes at our high school, the importance of light and shade in our endeavors of painting. Indeed he referred to it so often that it became his nickname. Thus for most of my time at high school, the only time I heard my father referred to by my fellow students was as Light and Shade Williams. Come to think of it, I also heard them refer to him in a couple of other ways, which is not perhaps appropriate to mention here. Dad had a great love of the classical European tradition of painting, especially that of Rembrandt. And I can still remember him showing me one of Rembrandt's paintings, yes, it was of the presentation in the temple. And saying to me, "Son, look at the way "in which Rembrandt has made use of darkness "in this painting." And in preparation for today, I looked it up again and those familiar with it, will know that it shows Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus, with Simeon and Anna and a few others, in the temple that day. And against a very dark background, a brilliant live shaft of light, illuminates the group. Especially Simeon, as he tenderly holds the child in his arms. And Simeon's face is radiant, with the joy and mystery of the moment. Most commentators emphasize the extraordinary way in which Rembrandt used light to portray the meaning of the event. However, for my father, it was the darkness that was indispensable to the portrayal of the message and to the genius of Rembrandt's expression of it. And I believe that my father's insight into the genius of Rembrandt, helps illuminate the power of our gospel reading this morning. The brightness of the Christmas message, and the light it shines into our lives, is surrounded by the various shades of darkness that we experience. It is not only that the light makes us aware of the darkness, but as my father remarked, the darkness allows us to see the promise and reality of the light. Yes, our life beyond Christmas Day and beyond our baptism, is one where we experience the reality and suffering of darkness, but because the darkness despite its terrible power, did not overcome the light of the incarnation, darkness need not overcome us too. Even as today, we may be experiencing the flatness and darker shade of life. In conclusion, let me reaffirm two major promises I believe are given in our gospel story this morning. One is to affirm that our discipleship here on Earth in this experience of our discipleship, we never experience the light of the gospel without some darkness impinging upon its brightness in our lives. This I believe is both reassuring and demanding. Reassuring, in that we certainly can be recipients of the light and truth of God's presence through the spirit, while experiencing the shadows of darkness and suffering. Even though we may only be able to see through a glass darkly, as Paul put it, we can still receive the light of God's truth and love. It is demanding in that at those times when all seems dark, we are not exempt from the demands of faith. For our crucified and risen Lord, calls us to faithfulness precisely within the dark storms of life we may be experiencing. But the final word and the sure promise given this day, as we move from Christmas to the New Year, even and especially as for most of you, unlike me, will be having to endure the coldness and the darkness of the winter ahead, I return to Australia and its summer in a week's time. We come to the last part of John's testimony, to the incarnation. For after his first promise that the light shines in the darkness, he then affirms, "And the darkness has not overcome it." So often, the positive is best expressed as the double negative. The darkness has not overcome the light. Darkness is not the final reality or the ultimate power. In that truth, and hope, we move into our future with its light and darkness, knowing that it is indeed God's future, established for us in the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in that promise, we return to the ordinary routines of our lives. To our hometowns, as Mary and Joseph did that day. And as we do, may I wish you a blessed and faithful New Year in darkness and in light. May the Lord be with you. Amen.