

**FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, YEAR C, DECEMBER 29, 2024**  
**Preached at All Saints, Leonia**

The story of Christmas whether it's in Luke, Matthew or John's gospel is about God being a part of our lives. All three gospels tell us about how God comes in unexpected ways that has the ability to continually surprise us. Where Luke and Matthew have a concrete story to tell with characters and places, John's gospel is a bit more esoteric that capitalizes on the theme of God's gift. John's gospel is filled with words of hope and assurance.

There is one phrase that stands out in today's Gospel which is "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." Did you notice how the gospel says "the light shines in the darkness. Notice the present tense: the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness cannot overcome it. The darkness will not ever overcome it. That's God's promise even when sometimes it seems difficult to feel that or to claim that for ourselves.

There are times when the problems in life, take us into a place where things seem to be in disarray and chaotic and it's hard for us to see God in the midst of that. Sometimes it takes a reorientation of our lives to see that God has been there all along and that God's grace is in the midst of us and that the light does indeed shine in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

So let me tell you a story that Canon Nan Cope from our National Cathedral told that emphasizes this understanding of God. It's about Mark Sullivan the author of the best selling novel, "Beneath a Scarlet Sky" that was published in 2017. In the preface to his book, Mark writes that 10 years prior to writing this book he was at the lowest point in his life, in a pit that was deep down, deep and dark. His brother, who was his best friend, had drunk himself to death. A book that he'd written no one wanted to read. He was in a business dispute and he was on the brink of personal bankruptcy. He was driving one evening and it was a cold and snowy night. He was so weighted down by the darkness in his life that he began to muse about his life insurance policies and he began to think about the fact that he was worth more to his family dead than alive. And he thought about driving his car into the highway abutment because it was a snowy night and no one would suspect suicide.

But an image of his wife and his children came to mind and he had a change of heart. He pulled the car over on the side and he began to shake uncontrollably, thinking about what he had just thought about doing. He was on the brink of a breakdown and he bowed his head and he prayed. Actually, he writes that he begged God to help him, to give him a story larger than himself that he could get lost in.

He then went on to a gathering and he began to hear snippets of a story, a true story, about this teenage boy in Italy who had become a part of the Roman Catholic underground railroad and helped bring people to safety during World War II. This man was still alive, living in Italy. And he knew that was the story God had given him to tell. So, with a lot of persistence he continued to call Pino Lella, who was, at that time, almost 90, to persuade him to let him come to Italy and let him tell the whole story that he'd never told, never shared. Mark Sullivan painstakingly drew the story out and did the research and the book is tragic as it is triumphant. But it's a story about an ordinary teenager who said yes when God called him.

Pino Lella's story starts when he was 17 and his family home was destroyed by bombs in Milan so his parents sent him off to the Alps to a Roman Catholic boys' camp that he and his brother had been a part of for many years. Father Re was still running the camp and through Father Re, God invited Pino to do something very very dangerous, which was to help Jews in Italy escape over the Italian Alps into Switzerland to safety. Pino said yes and he did it over and over and over again, risking his life time and time again to save people he didn't know.

And then when he was 18, a series of circumstances came together—some would call them coincidences, or we can believe that God had God's hand on the whole thing. He had the opportunity and was invited to become the personal driver for the highest ranking Nazi official in Italy which gave him access to confidential and terribly useful information. And he was asked if he would be a spy underground, risking his life to do so, to give critical information to the resistance movement and later, to the Allies. He said yes. Pino became the light, shining in the darkness.

You see, God takes ordinary people like you and me and enables us empowers us to do extraordinary things if we just say yes to the invitation. Mary said yes to Gabriel. Joseph said yes after hearing the dream. Pino said yes. You and I have the opportunity to listen for God, to look for the light, and then to be the light shining in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome it.

My prayer for you in 2025, is that when God places something on your heart for you to do that you will say yes and to carry the light into the darkness in your home, your town, in this nation and in the world. We can all do it with God's help. May you have a very blessed New Year that is filled with God's light that is shining through you. Amen