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First Christian Church
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Love or Everything that Counts

(John 1:1-5, 3:19a NRSV) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.... 3:19a But this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and some people loved darkness rather than light...

Writer Tom Bodett¹ is a writer, storyteller, and radio commentator who, in the 1990s, was living in Alaska and doing radio commentary for NPR. The first book of stories that he published is entitled The End of the Road,² and it is set in a mythical town of the same name – End of the Road, Alaska. Some of you may recall Bodett's name better from the folksy radio and television commercials he did for Motel 6 where the tagline at the end of the commercial was "*We'll leave the light on for you.*" Or if you have stayed at a Motel 6, you know that the wake up calls you'd receive were recordings in his voice. One of his stories, entitled the "Storbock Fire" seems fitting for our worship on this last Sunday in Advent, this last Sunday before Christmas, this Sunday where we focus with the worldwide church on the theme of "Love." Let me set the scene for Bodett's story:

It is the story of the Storbock family, Kirsten and Stormy, and their two children

¹<http://www.bodett.com/>

²<http://www.bodett.com/titles/endroad.htm>

Jason and Jenifer. The Storbocks had been laboring for what seemed like forever just outside of the town of End of the Road building themselves a house. Up in the hills overlooking the bay, they had worked for years and years as they'd had money and time. They had dug foundations and hauled materials and framed and sheet-rocked and painted and shingled and plumbed and all those thousand and one things that make a house. They'd done it pretty much all by themselves, adapting the house with two new additions as their family had grown over those years from just Kristen and Stormy to the four they now totaled.

And they had finally – finally! – moved in. Just a week ago. Their own home, built out of their dreams and their sweat. And they'd gotten ready to move in by holding a giant garage sale, getting rid of all that was old and shabby because they wanted to put only the best in that new house.

A week after they moved in, they had a fire. A fire that destroyed everything. A fire that left them running from that house only able to carry their toothbrushes and their wedding pictures. And as they stood there in shock, watching everything they owned go up in flames, their good friend Ed Flannagan bundled the family up and drove them to the duplex where he lived on one side and rented out the other side. That's the sad scene as Bodett comes to the end of this story; but now let me read you the ending in Bodett's own words:

All four Storbocks were in varying degrees of tears when they rolled up to Ed's duplex.

"What in the heck is this all about?" Stormy said, pulling himself together as Ed stopped short in the driveway behind at least six other cars.

There was a frenzy of activity around the house. Pastor Frank and his archrival Reverend Safire were on either end of a sleeper sofa, trying to get it through the

front door [of the vacant side of the duplex]. Frank's wife, Fanny, led a procession of ladies from the First Baptist Church carrying grocery bags and carrying cardboard boxes.

A herd of children careened around the front yard, begging Jennifer and Jason to come play as Stormy and Kirsten made their way into the duplex. Emily Flannagan was washing out cupboards and right behind her Mrs. Tuttle was situating plates and silverware that she was producing from a large box on the floor. Ed was getting a pot of stew going on the stove.

Kirsten, still in her housecoat, and the two pajama-clad kids were swept up the stairs by the church ladies and their boxes. And the kids were back in a few minutes in nice but unfamiliar clothes.

Stormy was speechless. Upstairs, Bud Koenig and Argus Winslow were arguing over the proper height to hang a shower curtain. Mr. Weekly was struggling to put together a bunk bed. In the bigger bedroom, the church ladies were producing slacks, skirts, and blouses out of their boxes for Kirsten. Back down in the living room, Pastor Frank and Reverend Safire were carrying in a coffee table, followed by Doug McDoogan, who walked straight up to Stormy with a loose wad of men's old clothes: "Here's all your old shirts and stuff I bought at your garage sale last week. They never fit anyway."

For the life of him, Stormy couldn't think of a single thing to do or say, except to stand and fight back the lump in his throat and the mist in his eyes. And he walked outside and leaned against the pickup truck which was where Ed found him, wiping tears from his eyes. Ed sidled up to him and folded his arms. Men share some of their most intimate moments leaning against vehicles with their arms crossed looking at anything but each other.

They leaned against the pickup and watched the kids. Jason and Jennifer were the center of attention. Stormy could tell that they were describing the big fire to an admiring audience with their dramatic gestures and animated faces. And then Stormy started to remember all the precious things gone up in smoke. Then he took a look around and stopped himself short. For no matter what he'd lost, and he knew that he'd be continually missing new things for months to come, he also knew one thing that was for sure: He knew that everything he really needed, everything that really counted, everything that was really important, was alive and well and within a hundred feet of where he stood, near enough to touch.

Now maybe you begin to see with me why the story of the Storbocks is so apt for this final Sunday of Advent, this Sunday when we focus on "love." For I think that if we wanted the most succinct scriptural summation of the story of Christmas to which we are headed it is to be found not in the lovely story of angels and shepherds from Luke, or in the story of the Wise Men from Matthew, but in the simple statement from John's gospel: *"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."* The power of love, so evident even when it doesn't need words in this story of the Storbocks, is the power of the light that shines even in the worst of the darkness. Now, of course, John also reminds us, with realistic honesty, that some people *"love the darkness more than the light"* (3:19). But that isn't what Stormy and the Storbocks experienced, at least on that night. No, what they experienced was indeed the power of the light of love: Everything that is needed, everything that really counts, is near enough to touch.

And yet.... The Christmas story is powerful – and it is not simply a Hallmark card platitude – precisely because it is honest. There is indeed light and love – but there is

also darkness. There is the darkness of natural forces in the world, whether fire or hurricane, whether tornado or tsunami, that do threaten to extinguish the light. There is the darkness of evil in the world that makes war and that leaves children homeless and that hurts hope. There is the darkness of men, women, and children who will sleep tonight under bridges within a few hundred yards of this beautiful church. And, if we're very honest, sometimes those powers of darkness are inside you and me too, aren't they? The darkness of inattention, the darkness of cynicism, the darkness of apathy, the darkness of being narrower and less empathetic than God would have us be, the darkness of all those "isms" that draw lines between people that can become chokeholds on the prospect of life abundant. Indeed, the darkness – like the light, like love – is also near enough to touch. And we can choose to give in to, to embrace, that darkness, to be the kind of people of whom John speaks – those who love the darkness more than the light – because loving the darkness is just plain easier sometimes.

Or there is the light. Light that sometimes flickers against the winds that would snuff it out. Light that is a God-given offering to you and me, to those sitting around you, to those in Iraq and Iran and the Sudan, those under the bridges that span Fountain Creek, those children at the Tennyson Center and Urban Peak who were hurt by the ones whom they should have been able to trust the most, and in every place where darkness has a toehold. Even the darkness of our hearts. Light. Light which shines imperfectly in you and me. Light which in your life and in my life sometimes fails to reflect the marvelous incandescence of God's Christmas light.

And so the Christmas story of "love come down at Christmastime," as the poet put it, is also the story of a **choice** put before us: darkness or light, darkness or light. The story of Jesus coming in the midst of darkness to bring light and life to all is an offer to us to be loyal to that vision of light and life. Light which can claim us and embolden

us and illuminate us despite our imperfections. That, my friends, is exactly why we gather in worship on this final Sunday before Christmas – to hear that ancient story, to have that light shined on us again, to remind us of who we are and of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. One of the root meanings of the word “to worship” is “to give thanks.” And that fits. It fits indeed. For our worship on this final Sunday before Christmas is the opportunity to give thanks for the light of love that the darkness has not extinguished, and it is an opportunity to pledge once again our loyalty to that love – despite whatever darkneses in us would try to undercut it. Our opportunity this day is to be reminded that even in the midst of times good and bad that through Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, everything that counts is indeed close enough to touch. The Storbocks discovered that – even though it was a hard and painful context to learn it – and we can discover it again and again and again. Or as the hymn puts it so well, “Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in his wings.” For that great good news, for that light that is not quenched, for that light that is our hope – thanks be to God!