

Bear Witness to the Light

1st Sunday After Christmas

John 1:1-18 Genesis 1:1-5
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 30, 2018

Back on the first Sunday of this month of December, the First Sunday of Advent, we explored the Gospel of Luke's introduction of John the Baptist and his message. Coming out of the wilderness, thus fulfilling an Old Testament Hebrew prophecy, John prepared the way for the coming Messiah by proclaiming a message of repentance of sins – of turning away from those ways of being and doing that are contrary to how God would have us live in relationship with others. That is why the theme for our season of Advent this year focused on our own wilderness journey as a way for us to prepare for God's Presence in our midst. We did indeed put a little Lent in our Advent this year. Today, on what the liturgical calendar calls the 1st Sunday after Christmas, we find ourselves in the 12-day season of Christmastide. It will end when we celebrate Epiphany next Sunday, the story of the magi following a star.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, we are again looking at the role played by John the Baptist. But in contrast to Luke's version, the author of the Gospel of John gives a more philosophical approach on the role of John the Baptist. He inserts the story of John into his remarkably poetic introduction of Christ that begins with the famous words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The author continues his description of what it means to call Jesus the Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ, by explaining that Jesus is the light coming into the darkness, and the Word of God made flesh.

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist is not even called John the Baptist, but just John. **In this gospel, John is not principally a baptizer, a prophet, or even a messenger from God. John is primarily a witness, one who has come to testify to "the Word made flesh," to "the light" that no darkness has or will ever overcome.** The Greek verb "to witness" (from which we also get the word, martyr) occurs only once in the Gospel of Matthew, once in Luke, and no times in Mark. Yet this verb is used 31 times in the Gospel of John. **The act of bearing witness is a defining concept and characteristic of discipleship in this gospel.**

The primary message of this gospel is that the light and life that is of God is now made visible and accessible to us through this person, Jesus. As Christians, then, we see Jesus as the definitive revelation and physical embodiment of the intentions of God for humankind. Or, as Jesus Seminary scholar John Dominic Crossan has famously stated, "Jesus is what God looks like in sandals." That is perhaps the simplest way to define the fancy theological term, incarnation.

Well, as I am prone to ask at this point in a sermon, what does any of this have to do with us? For your consideration. **If John the Baptist's role in this gospel was to testify and bear witness to the light, then that is our role, as well.** That is our challenge. So, then, how are you, how am I, how are we together as a community of faith bearing witness to the light, both among and within us right now, and to the light that is to come?

It's not an overstatement to say we are living in dark times. But then again, that can be said of basically any time and place in history. Therefore, testifying to light, especially during deep darkness, can bring the possibility for illumination to all those who are close to it. That's one of the benefits of a healthy congregation. But remember, though the light of Christ does indeed dwell within each of us, **the point in this gospel is that we ourselves are not the**

source of light. Rather, we can point towards the light that enlightens us. And we can reflect that light through our thoughts, words, and actions.

Over 800 years ago, St. Francis of Assisi put it this way, “We are the moon reflecting the rays of the sun from our surface.” The moon itself is not a source of light, but rather a reflector of light. And the amount of light the moon reflects is in direct proportion to it being in the unblocked path of the sun. Perhaps we can apply this analogy to ourselves, again as individuals and as a congregation. The analogy goes something like this: **The amount of light that shines as a reflection from us is in direct proportion to how open and unblocked we are from the true source of light, namely God** – the God whom we understand as revealed through the life and ministry of Jesus.

So, here's one of these tough questions that I like to throw out from time to time. **Are there any attitudes or behaviors in your life, or in the life of this community, that may be acting to block the direct light of God?** Using the moon analogy, is the amount of light that you reflect, or I, or we together, more like a full moon, or a half moon, or a small crescent moon, or heaven forbid, a lunar eclipse which is unable to reflect any light at all?

Just as John came as a witness to testify to the light, we as Christians are also called to bear witness to the light, and to reflect its brilliance. Granted, as progressive Presbyterians the way we testify is quite different from our more conservative and/or evangelical brothers and sisters in the faith. I wonder how many hearts would completely stop if I were to call on one of you to come forward and “share your testimony”? No, we tend to testify not primarily through our words but through our actions, and even through our attitudes. So, the question becomes: **Does what you and I believe, say, and do in our daily lives testify and bear witness to the light?**

John put himself in a position to be able to witness to and point to the light. That should be our goal as well – to put ourselves in a position to witness to, to point to, and to reflect the light of God’s love and justice and peace and compassion – a love and justice and peace and compassion that was revealed by and through Jesus – the Word of God made flesh, the light that darkness can never overcome. This begins by **allowing and welcoming the light to enter into your darkness, our darkness.** And sometimes it takes a spirit of humbleness to admit that yes, there are times when we dwell in the dark. Thankfully, however, that is often when others come to us to bear witness to and reflect the light of hope, peace, comfort, and love – when we need it most. **The good news is that there is always light available to shine upon us, and to reflect off of us.** Here's some obvious and simple ways we can reflect the light of God's Presence onto others:

- A simple smile
- A handshake or a hug
- A kind word
- Words and actions of encouragement
- Words and actions that provide an understanding of healthy boundaries
- Forbearance and patience with another
- Forgiving, and perhaps reconciling with another
- Sometimes, no words at all, just a ministry of presence.

Today we stand as witnesses to testify to that light, the light coming into the world, the light that the darkness of the world has never been able to overcome. For as the gospel writer declares, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” As the moon, let us all bear witness to and reflect that light, starting right now!

Amen.