

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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John 1:6-8 (NRSV)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. [7] He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. [8] He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1:19-28 (NRSV)

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" [20] He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." [21] And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." [22] Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" [23] He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,' "
as the prophet Isaiah said.

[24] Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. [25] They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" [26] John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, [27] the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." [28] This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

THE SIGN OF THINGS TO COME

When our family drove home on interstate 95 after a visit to Florida, we could count on at least one thing to entertain us, the signs advertising a glorified truck stop called "South of the Border." One sign had a full size car protruding from it, with the headlights glowing! Each sign told of great things to come, a place to buy firecrackers, a place with clean restrooms, a resort to rival Disney World, and an observation tower from which you could see six states!

According to the signs, you could get anything you might want at South of the Border. Almost everyone I know has stopped there once. But, one stop is enough because unfortunately the reality was not nearly as entertaining as the signs.

Today we read again about John the Baptist. But, today's text is not as much about whom John is as it is about whom John is not. John is not the Messiah. John is not a great prophet like Elijah. John is one who points away from himself toward the one who comes. John is like a human billboard on interstate 95 who prepares the way of the Lord. He tells us, "The Messiah is coming. He will be the light of the world. He will show us the way, God's way."

Actually we do have signs like that along some roads, signs that warn that the end might be near. But, people don't pay much more attention to those signs than they do the signs proclaiming the wonders of South of the Border. They've heard it all before. They are jaded by TV preachers and self-serving evangelists who only want to increase their own financial well-being. If people are to hear the message of Jesus today, there must be a different kind of sign, one that proclaims the hope of the gospel with integrity.

HUMILITY

I think that John the Baptist as revealed in today's lesson from the gospel shows us the way. The key to being an effective witness for Jesus is to consistently point away from us and toward the One who comes. It is to cultivate a sense of humility. As John put it concerning the coming Messiah, "I'm not even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals."

Compare that to the current crop of evangelists who seem to measure their effectiveness in terms of buildings completed and money raised. Sometimes it seems like the mystery of God's will is "dumbed down" to meeting the goals of the church for that year or even just having things go smoothly in our personal lives.

It seems to me that the glory of God is greater than anything we can imagine. We cannot limit God to what we've included in our five year plan. God has other plans that we know nothing about.

Who are we really honoring with our priorities? To whom are we pointing? Are we erecting a sign that points to the living God, the God who created heaven and earth? Are we erecting a sign that encourages people to expect Jesus, the one who (as Isaiah told us in our first lesson for today) proclaimed good news to the poor and release to the captives?

Or are we erecting a sign proclaiming a different Messiah, one that is more in line with our expectations but one who in the end will be just as disappointing a pit stop at South of the Border?

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

I like Advent because the season is at its heart a season of mystery. For a moment we remember (as the hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" puts it) the "hopes and fears of all the years." And in that moment of nostalgia and wistfulness, maybe, just maybe we are able to imagine One who is greater than ourselves.

In this special time of preparation we strain to follow the example of John the Baptist, refusing all titles of power or prestige. Instead, we claim only the title suggested by the prophet Isaiah. We are the "voice of one crying in the wilderness."

And what a wilderness it is. It is a wilderness filled with light. When I look at my neighbor's homes I see lit up, blown up snowmen twinkling on the lawn. Santa is sliding down rooftops. There are elaborately decorated trees everywhere ... lights, lights and more lights.

And yet the darkness of Advent is only deepened by our plethora of electronic wonders.

People tell me things like, “If I can only make it through the holidays, then I’ll be happy.” A season that is supposed to be joyous is quite often filled with despair. The lights dazzle the eye, but for many the lights of the season bring no warmth. There is emptiness in the heart that no amount of gifts under the tree can fill.

That’s the void that Jesus comes to fill. Jesus comes to fill the void in the human heart. Jesus comes to light up lives with the hope of justice and peace. Jesus comes to do what we cannot do for ourselves. Indeed, we cannot even imagine the power of that coming.

John the Baptist knew that he was only a bit player in this production. He was not the main attraction. I was amused to hear one of the members of our church describing a play in which he had a part. He said, “I had only two lines, and they cut one of those lines!”

That’s John ... the Baptist. He’s not the light. He’s not the star of the show. According to the Scriptures, he must decrease in order for Jesus to increase. (John 3:30)

His one and only line in this great drama is “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”(1:29) Beyond that John doesn’t know anything. The religious leaders came to John and wanted answers. They said, “If you’re not the Messiah, then who are you? Who authorized you to baptize? Are you Elijah come back from heaven? Are you a prophet?”

John replied, “I’m none of those things. I’ve just been called upon to deliver this one message in the wilderness. As the choir put it in our anthem for today, “There’s a light a-comin in the darkness.” But, John is just as much in the dark as everyone else. He too is waiting for the light.

WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

All of us need to spend some time waiting for the light to come. Oh, I know. We have the whole story. We live this side of the resurrection. But, that doesn't mean that we should be smug in our knowledge and faith.

There is something about the Christian faith that always calls us to strain toward the future. The light we have today seems to be no match for the darkness and struggles that surround us, but we believe that the light we have is just a foretaste of things to come.

We must be looking for the Messiah in order to appreciate His arrival.

Several years ago, just before Christmas a music teacher borrowed a copy of the score of Handel's Messiah from the public library. But, due to a clerical error, the transaction was not recorded. There were several other requests for the score, and the library staff, unaware that it had been checked out, spent many hours searching in vain for it in the stacks.

On the day that the music teacher returned the score, placing it on the circulation desk, he was astonished to hear the librarian spontaneously, joyously and loudly shout out, "The Messiah is here! The Messiah is back!"

Every head in the library turned toward the voice, but everyone soon went back to their work. Only the library staff could understand the joy of the occasion because they had been longing for the Messiah's return.

Like John we might not know how or when, but we do know that soon things will change in a profound way. The Messiah is coming.

There's a light a-comin to our darkness. The power of life and hope revealed in Jesus Christ is still being born in the lives of people every day.

And it makes a difference.

REFLECTED LIGHT

Jesus once told his disciples something startling. He said, “You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14)

In other words, like John the Baptist we are to be very public in our proclamation of the gospel. We are to light up the world, not by who we are and what we can do but by the reflected glow of Jesus. An early church father, St. Francis said that we are like the moon, reflecting the glow of sunlight, but we are not the source of that light.

I have learned over the years that if I am willing to go into difficult situations, trusting in God’s power to heal and save, God can cause some amazing things to happen. But, I also know that if I go into a difficult situation thinking that it is all up to me, quite often I end up feeling discouraged and defeated.

I am reminded that I am not the light. The power to save does not reside with me. It resides with Jesus. I must point away from myself to the one who comes. We live not by bread alone but by the word of God, the hope that there is a greater day coming.

Like the religious leaders of John’s day we are impatient when it comes to waiting for that hope. We want to attribute messianic powers to human leaders. People often idolize religious or political figures. They want more from them than they can deliver.

And quite often leaders fall into the trap of believing that praise. Instead of pointing away from themselves, instead of serving the needs of the kingdom, they allow others to point toward them.

Salvation is not to be found in any preacher, Sunday school teacher or elder. Salvation is not to be found in beloved family members or loved ones. Salvation is only found in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In a world filled with glitz, we must look to the one true light, the light that shines in the darkness.

THE FIRE OF HOPE

Rabbi Hugo Gwynn was sent to Auschwitz as a little boy. In the midst of the death and horror of the concentration camp, many Jews held onto whatever shreds of their religious observance they could.

One cold winter's evening, Hugo's father gathered the family in the barracks. It was the first night of Chanukah, the Feast of Lights. The young child watched in horror as his father took the family's last pad of butter and made a makeshift candle using a string from his ragged clothes. He then took a match and lit the candle.

Hugo cried, "Father no! That butter is our last bit of food! How will we survive?"

His father replied, "We can live many days without food. We cannot live for a single minute without hope. This is the fire of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere."

Jesus said that we can get so involved in asking the mundane questions of life ... What shall we eat? What shall we drink? ... that we forget the more important question ... What does it all mean?

SIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Only in the darkness can we see the importance of that question. Only in the darkness can we understand our desperate need for light.

A man told of going a retreat as a college student. It was in the Fall around the beginning of November that year. They had gone up into the mountains, many miles from the closest city.

That first evening they took a late night walk and had prayer under the stars. Peering up into the sky, the young man was impressed by the star filled sky.

It was something they rarely saw in the city. And the student heard himself saying, “The stars are so bright out here.”

And the leader who was standing beside him said, “No, the world is so dark.”

Sometimes I think that those who live in the deepest darkness are best able to light the fire of hope. In their darkness they are able to see the light more clearly. They are not distracted by the glitz of the artificial and the transient. They are not fooled by the temptation of a false self-confidence. In their darkness they are able to see the light. In their weakness they are able to seek out true strength and true hope.

I am reminded of what Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul was suffering from some kind of physical ailment. We don't know what it was but we do know that it was troublesome enough that Paul had asked the Lord several times to remove this “thorn in the flesh.”

But, each time the Lord said “no.” The Lord told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

For those of us who struggle during this Advent season, could it be that the power of God is made perfect in our weakness? Could it be that in our dark night of the soul we are best able to see true light and true hope? Could it be that in our weakness we are the ones best able to point to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?

If you think about it the most inspirational stories take place on the darkest night. The most inspirational stories take place when all seems lost. The most inspirational stories take place where the world is dark and the sky is filled with the brilliance of a special star.

THE HILL OF HOPE

In Lithuania there was a hill that became one of the world's greatest beacons of hope. Thousands of crosses were placed on that hill by the Lithuanian

people in defiance of the Soviet regime. But, the Soviets would have none of it. From 1917 until 1985 they would bulldoze the hill again and again out of disdain for the “ignorance and fanaticism” that the crosses represented for them.

But, bulldozers and threats of deportation could not prevent the pilgrims and patriots from returning at night to start over. Eventually the hope represented by this hill was able to win the day. In 1985, the Soviet bulldozer campaign ended when Gorbachev quietly said, “Let them have their hill.” A few years later students began to demonstrate for independence and before long others followed. The hope represented by that hill became a reality.

Long ago on a dark winter night a blinding light appeared in the wilderness. Shepherds keeping watch over their flocks were given a sign of hope, the sign of baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. He would be the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

And years later on a dark day, on a hill filled with crosses, the promise became a reality. The hope of life eternal and salvation came into the world through the death and resurrection of a Savior, the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

That’s where we must point this morning and every morning. We must point toward that dark hill of crosses. In that place that represents the worst that human beings can do we find lasting hope. On that dark hill we can see the light most clearly. On that dark hill we hear a Savior say, “Father, forgive them.”

That’s the Savior to whom John pointed, when he said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And that’s the Savior to whom we must point as well. In a dark world of condemnation, we bring the light of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN