

Testify to the Light
A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent: December 17, 2017
John 1:6-9
Lansdowne UMC

When I was in middle school, our family had a vacation. At some point we made our way to a cave-- we've been to several caves, but I can't remember which one it was. We entered the cave via an elevator, and our guide promptly led us to a rather large open area. We spent a few minutes looking around, with the guide helping us to understand the various rock structures that we were seeing, he explained that there was absolutely no natural light this far underground. With a certain amount of dramatic flair, he revealed that in a moment, he was going to turn the lights off, at which time we would experience about 30 seconds of "complete, utter, darkness." Middle school me was quite excited about that, and it seemed like others enjoyed the thought too.

The moment came for him to flip the switch. As he did, a satisfying snap echoed through the cave as the incandescent lights faded. About 1 second later, it became clear that we were not in "complete, utter, darkness." Rather, we were all basking in the surprisingly bright green glow of my t-shirt, which brightly advertized the "Roadkill Cafe." Everyone in the room could see the tagline of the restaurant: "Fresh and tender, right off your fender."

My mom quickly moved to cover me with her jacket, but the potential experience of "complete, utter darkness" was ruined. Such is the effect that the tiniest bit of light has on darkness. The darkness had nothing

against even the faint glow of my tacky t-shirt, which advertized itself so well.

We read from the Gospel of John this morning that, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John [-- that’s John the baptist]. 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.

And continuing on to verse 9, it says: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

The Gospel writer leaves it as no great mystery as to who this light is. In 1 John 1:5, the same writer tells us that “*God* is light.” And a few chapters after here, in John 8, Jesus will say, “I am the light of the world.” God is light, and the light that was coming into the world was Jesus, God in human form. Yes, Jesus comes as a baby, but he comes as light.

Reading this passage this week, I found myself asking a question I’d never asked of it before. It says that John “came as a witness to testify to the light.” Well, “why does the light need to be testified about?” Doesn’t the glow advertise itself? The enemies that I’d inadvertently made in that cave didn’t need me to tell them about my luminescent shirt. They all knew! I’d gone and ruined their darkness and everyone knew it.

“Why does the light need a witness?” That’s the question I’d like to meditate on this morning. The flip side of that question is this: “What keeps the world from seeing the light?”

Reason number 1 that the light needs a witness: no one is born with fully functioning spiritual sight.

When a baby is still being carried by its mother, it lives in near darkness. There just isn't enough light to aid the baby's ability to perceive the world. An unborn baby has eyes, but they aren't particularly beneficial until the baby is born. Once that day comes, though, the baby comes out of the darkness of the womb and into the light of the world. With the world full of light, suddenly the newborn is bombarded with an incredible amount of new visual stimuli. And over the next several days, weeks, and months, that child will learn to do all types of things, like track the movement of a parent, and focus on the world around them.

In John chapter 3, Jesus says that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"-- without having a new birth. Born from above. Born again. It's such a powerful, beautiful image. Unfortunately it's an image that gets thrown around casually in some circles and trampled on in other circles. Yet scripture and our Methodist history testify with Jesus to this reality: in order to see the light of Christ, we must have a second birth.

How does this happen? Most of us here understand how a baby is conceived in the natural way. Well, there is a spiritual analog. The Gospel writer says in verses 12 and 13 of John 1, that "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."

What does that mean? It means that when we trust in Jesus, the Spirit of God comes and overshadows the spirit of a person, and a new spiritual baby is conceived. And once that spiritual baby reaches a certain point of maturity, it is born. Life in God's Kingdom begins. Having come into the light of Christ, that baby is able to see kingdom of God, because Christ is lighting it up for that person like never before. Spiritual eyes are opened to reveal a deeper, truer reality than was previously thought possible.

And when there is a new baby in Christ, we don't put it out in the yard to see if it grows, but the church tenderly cares for the new life, giving it spiritual milk, and all the things that new lives need. And as we do that over the next days, weeks, months, and years, that spiritual infant will grow and mature, and learn to do all types of things with their spiritual senses. The child of God will learn to track the movement of their heavenly Father, and focus on different aspects of God's kingdom.

That's reason number 1 why we need to testify to the light: because no one is born with developed spiritual sight. It is a gift of God received by faith in Christ. And so the light needs a testimony from those who have eyes to see it.

The second reason that we need to testify to the light is that our spiritual senses dull if we don't use them. Put another way when it comes to spiritual vision, you "use it or lose it."

Testifying to the light isn't something that only John the Baptist does. Rather, it's an act of obedience for all Christians that has the benefit of keeping our spiritual senses sharp.

That pretty colored part of the eye is the iris. It's actually a muscle that flexes the lens within the eye so that things come into proper focus. And you know what happens to a muscle if it doesn't get used. It gets weak. I understand that people living on submarines for a long time will lose their distance vision because they don't use it. Use it or lose it.

Everything we receive from God we receive as a gift-- undeserved and unearned. But we *keep* the gifts of God by obedience-- by using what God has given to us.

What does that mean practically? It means that if God has done something amazing in your life, that's a story that needs to be told. It doesn't have to be in some formal way. It's just telling your story to people that you love. There are people that just don't have the spiritual vision to have seen what you've seen. And let's just be really honest with ourselves, if we don't have stories to share, we need to make sure that our own vision hasn't gotten dull from lack of use.

Reason number 3 we need to testify to the light is that those without vision don't understand their need for light

I want to be clear, the sight/blindness analogy is one of the best analogies we have. It's a biblical analogy. But we need to be careful that it's not thrown around without compassion for those who are physically unable to see. I gained a new respect for people who are blind a few months ago, when some folks from the church organized a few trips over to "blind industries." They're a non-profit business just down the road that employs blind and visually impaired people. They're contracted by

various government agencies to produce office supplies, among other things. One of the things that was very striking to me was how incredibly capable the folks there were at doing whatever their job was. They were confident, efficient, and safe, even as their hands were close to huge moving parts and sharp blades.

If you had asked them, I imagine that many of them would have told you that having sight wouldn't help them do their job any better.

Not having sight doesn't mean that someone is incapable or useless in a sighted world-- and that's a wonderful thing. But that's why the light needs to be testified to. There is another dimension to reality that is inaccessible to many people, and they seem to get along fine. But unlike physical vision, spiritual vision is available to anyone who seeks it through faith in Christ.

The fourth reason that we need to testify to the light is because it's not obvious to those in darkness that the light is good. So we have to testify to the light, and we have to testify that the light is good.

Why isn't it obvious that light is good? Well, light exposes whatever goes on in darkness. People do bad things in the dark because they can't be seen. We don't just have street lights to keep people from tripping, but to keep people from doing bad things. In other words, people who want to do bad things want to stay hidden in the darkness. Light is not the friend of things done in darkness.

There's that wonderful verse, John 3:16: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish

but will have eternal life. I imagine that not many people are familiar with a few verses later, though. In John 3:19 and following, Jesus says

19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

You know, John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement, organized the people God awakened through this ministry into groups of about 12 called classes. Classes were small groups whose purpose was to give people an opportunity to watch over one another in love-- holding one another accountable to doing no harm, doing good, and being faithful in the spiritual disciplines (bible reading, prayer, fasting, and so on). There was no Methodist church, and so being a Methodist meant taking part in one of these class meetings. That's one level of coming into the light. It's giving up a degree of ownership of ourselves to let others watch over us.

But there was another small group structure within early Methodism, called the band meeting. Class meetings were required. Band meetings were optional, but abundant. The primary purpose of the band meeting was to live out the scriptural mandate from the book of James to confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. So that's what they'd do. They'd gather together weekly and ask each other these five questions-- and oh boy are you going to love these:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?

2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. (And this is the best one) Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

This is why I bring this up. Sin loves to stay hidden. It hates coming into the light, where it is seen and exposed for what it is. And so the Enemy tells us all types of lies to stir up fear in us. He says, “If they only knew what you’d done, they wouldn’t love you.” Or “sure maybe people can be forgiven for some little things, but not what you’ve done....”

What the Enemy doesn’t want you to know is that guilt and sin loses its power when it comes into the light of Christ. We have to testify to the goodness of the light, because the world, and too often we Christians ourselves, enjoy the darkness more than we’d care to admit.

What I admire so much about early Methodists is that they waged a war against the darkness inside them. They threw open all the curtains and opened all the doors to let Christ’s light in. Because when sin is exposed as sin, and not hidden in the dark, then our hearts are actually moved to repentance. (I think a few of you understand the need for this type of group. If that’s you, come talk to me)

John announced that light was coming into the world. And now it’s obvious why John baptized people so that their sins would be forgiven. The light *will* expose our deeds, whether good or bad, so it’s time to fess up to what’s been going on in darkness.

And so we testify to the light. We testify because (1) no one is born with developed spiritual vision. We testify out of obedience, because (2) when it comes to spiritual vision, its “use it or lose it.” We testify because (3) those without vision might not understand their need for light. And we testify (4) because darkness doesn’t like being exposed, and we need to testify that the light is good.

The light of Christ is good news. Since the light of Christ has come into the world, we can say, your sins-- yes even yours-- can be forgiven. You too, can receive a new life in Christ and be able to see the kingdom of God. You too can come into the light and cease living in fear of being found out. You too, can experience God’s unfathomable love, and be a living testimony to the light.