

The Third Sunday Of Advent
December 13, 2020
Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson
Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

GOSPEL: John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

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Jerusalem was in ruins. The mighty temple had been destroyed. Many families had been torn apart as Babylon took prisoners away from the nation of Judah. The people of Jerusalem did not heed the prophet's warnings; they did not strive for justice and righteousness; they turned to idolatry and away from God; they broke the covenant. It was believed that the city's destruction, including the temple, and the exile from the promised land was punishment for the people's unwillingness to care for the poor, the oppressed, the captive, the mourning, and the widow. It was a dark time for Judah.

Yet the people cried out to God, for they were now oppressed by a foreign empire. The people remembered their sacred covenant that was made generations ago at Mount Sinai. They remembered God's promise of deliverance. So they cried out to God, and God listened. After 70 years of exile, the people were finally allowed to return home.

However, one can only imagine the despair and grief that the nation of Judah felt upon returning to a broken city with God's dwelling place, the temple, nothing but a pile of rubble. Thankfully, there was good news for the people. Our Isaiah reading this morning is indeed the good news that was proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem.



In this proclamation of the good news it is promised that God will comfort the mourning. The mourning shall receive a garland instead of ashes, gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. God will make the people to be like strong oak trees of righteousness, so that they will display God's glory. God promises that the ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; they shall repair the ruined city.

But what is even more good news to the people is that God promises to make another everlasting covenant where their descendants will be known among all nations. This is because God will bless them with garments of salvation and robes of righteousness, for God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up in all nations.

And this prophecy will come true because God will mold the people of Judah and all of Israel to love justice and despise robbery and wrongdoing. God will do this in the hope that the spark of justice turns into a blazing fire that burns in the hearts of all people from all nations, so that all will come to know the greatness of God's love, grace, and mercy.

It was a dark time for the church in Thessalonica. The community was mourning the deaths of some of their members, and the grief was strong. So Paul takes it upon himself to remind the Thessalonian community to not lose hope, reminding them of God's promise of salvation through Christ Jesus. Part of that holding on to hope was to remind the people of the Thessalonian church to continue to live faithfully until the day of the Lord's return.

This is where our second reading, the epistle reading, comes into play. Paul reminds the people that, while they are waiting for the day of salvation, they should continue to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances. In addition the people should also allow the Holy Spirit to work among them, to trust in the prophets, and to cling to the good and abstain from what is evil. In doing these things Paul promises that Christ will sanctify them and keep them blameless until the day of the Lord's coming. So once again, there is good news among dark times.

Going back many years from the time of the church in Thessalonica we find the people of Israel crying out to God again during dark times. The Roman Empire was in control. So many people were suffering from poverty, illness, and being the outcasts of society. The religious leaders cared more about power and wealth than they did about ministry.

So God sends John from the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. John begins to testify to the Light; the true Light the enlightens everyone that was coming into the world; the Light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. In doing so many came out to hear John speak and to be baptized in the Jordan River. This caught the interest of religious leaders and they sent representatives to find out who John was. This is where John admits that he is not the light, but the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord. The Light in whom John testifies is more good news in dark times. After all, not



only did John testify to the Light of the world, but he also later testifies that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

All three of these texts that we heard read to us this morning are a reminder to us that God is indeed active during dark times, working to bring us good news. These are very appropriate texts as we wait expectantly during our current dark times. It is not just the loss of daylight that is causing darkness to shroud over us. We are also living in the darkness of a pandemic where we are seeing a spike in COVID-19 infections, a pandemic that has almost claimed the lives of 300,000 people. We are living in the darkness of division where society has declared that if you disagree you are an enemy and should be despised. We are living in the darkness of individualism where the selfishness of the self-supersedes the care of community that reaches out to others. We are living in the darkness where there is a lack of compassion and forgiveness.

And yet the season of Advent reminds us that God is still at work in the midst of the darkness, for we give thanks for the gift that is the Light of the world as we wait expectantly for the Light's return. The true Light gives us our hope and reminds us of God's promise of restoration, reconciliation, and resurrection.

The Light was present centuries ago when the people began to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. The Light shined in their hearts as they remembered what it meant to be God's chosen and beloved. The Light was also present in the church community at Thessalonica. The words of St. Paul brought forth the Light in reminding the Thessalonians to hold fast to their hope of resurrection. Not only that, but also through reminding the Thessalonians that the presence of Christ dwells within and works to sanctify them so that their whole being is ready when the Day of the Lord comes.

The good news for us is that we are living in the age of the resurrection here and now. We have witnessed, through the telling of God's word, the Light of the world conquer darkness. We have witnessed to the fact that the dark tomb of death could not extinguish the Light of God's love for the world, but rather that the Light burst forth and shined so brightly that it transformed all of creation into new life.

The witness of the people of Israel who would receive the light of righteousness and justice, the witness of Paul's unceasing hope in the Light's dwelling within us, and the witness of John, who reminds us that the true Light is coming once again, all point us to the fact that our dark times will not last. The Light of the world continues to take flesh in us, so that we can always remember that the very core of our being, our one true identity is that we are God's beloved. No darkness can take that away from us.

But the great thing about the Light shining in us is that it shines so brightly it becomes a beacon of hope for our community outside the virtual walls of our congregation. We are the beacon of hope that reminds the broken world that it does not have to allow darkness to be the ruling force in their lives. Our light is a witness to the true Light's power of redemption, reconciliation, and resurrection. Our light is a witness to the new life given to each of us through the Light's death and resurrection, which means it is a witness to the joy of being in loving relationship with God. Our light is a witness to the fact that we are free to love and care for neighbor



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— the captive, the outcast, the poor, the mourning, and anyone who is suffering in some way — because our witness and testimony to the Light reminds us that we have already been freed from sin and death, which means we don't have to spend our lives trying to earn God's favor. Instead, we have already received God's favor, we have already been claimed by God for all eternity; we are now free to shine our lights towards others, so that they may also be enlightened to the fact that the core of their being is God's beloved as well.

Thankfully, we have several lights that, should we ever forget our own true identity because the darkness seems like it is will always shroud over us, will point us back to the Light of the world. We already know that one light is the power of God's word, which instills a blazing fire of love within us. But then we also have the lights of our Advent wreath, which grows brighter and brighter as we light more candles and remember that Light of the world is coming once again. Then, there is also my favorite light source, which is the lighting of the new fire during the Easter Vigil. It is a fire that shines so much light, one cannot help but feel the joy of God's ultimate action of love that overcomes the darkness of death. Plus, each of us are a light to each other, and we are free to uplift each other and remember the love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness given freely to us because we are beloved by God.

We, working together, are indeed a very strong light source for the world. We are the lights that God uses to overcome the darkness. We have the Light of the World dwelling within us, which means we, like John, can give testimony to the true Light, being that voice that cries in the wilderness in order to prepare the way of the Lord. Our love, which is God's love, will indeed be the light that shines in the dark broken world, and points it to the true Light, which will enlighten us and others with righteousness and justice.

Amen.

