

Reflect the Light

Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Last Sunday, I didn't preach from the lectionary Gospel reading that was assigned to the Second Sunday in Advent. In fact, I didn't preach on anything at all. The Word, you may recall, was presented not in the form of a sermon but rather in the form of song, beautifully presented by our Chancel Choir, under the gifted musicianship of Dr. Kim Childs, our Director of Music, and Alta Selvey, our organist and Bell Choir Director.

If I had read the lectionary passage, then you would have heard about the person whom the Gospel writer **Mark** introduces as, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

The **Gospel of Luke** identifies John by his family name and the geographical center of his ministry, "...John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:2-3).

The **Gospel of Matthew** states, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 3:1-2).

The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all present a somewhat similar picture of a person named John who came from the wilderness, preached a message of repentance, and baptized believers. I bring this up primarily as a way to contrast how much differently the **Gospel of John** introduces and presents this person. You may have never noticed before that in the Fourth Gospel this person is not initially introduced as a baptizer or from the wilderness, nor is it mentioned that his message was one of repentance. No, the Gospel of John simply records, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (John 1:6).

In this gospel, John is not principally a baptizer, a prophet, an exhorter, or even a messenger from God. John is a witness. The Greek word for witness is *martyria*, from which we also get the word martyr. John was sent by God to testify to "the Word made flesh," "The Light" that no darkness has or will ever extinguish. The principle vocation of John in this gospel then is to bear witness, a verb that occurs thirty-three times in the Fourth Gospel and only twice in the entirety of the other three gospel accounts combined.

Much like in a legal trial, John plays the role of the lead witness. His task is to recognize the true light when it appears, and to call attention to it so that others may recognize it and believe. And by 'believe,' the gospel writer means much more than

just giving intellectual assent. **In the Gospel of John, to 'believe' means to recognize, trust in, and commit oneself to the Light.**

The gospel writer also makes pains to explain who John is not. John himself is NOT the light. When questioned by the Jewish religious authorities, he goes on to claim he is NOT the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet. In claiming his identity, John simply quotes from Isaiah 40, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight they way of the Lord'" (Isaiah 40:3).

So two things are clear about the first human that is introduced in the Fourth Gospel – he is sent by God not to compete with the Word of God coming into the world, but to bear witness to him; not to be the light of God to the world, but to testify to the light of God. The Gospel of John is a book of signs, and John serves as the "First Witness," the signpost and the standard for any subsequent signposts to God's Word and Light. No sign is from God in this Gospel unless it bears witness to the Word and the Light and leads all to come to believe in God through him.

It's not until later in the first chapter of John that we learn that God's Word and Light to which John points is none other than Jesus, the embodiment of God's presence within the world. The fancy theological term for this embodiment is 'incarnation.' Biblical commentator Marcia Riggs writes:

According to feminist theologians, the gift of the **incarnation** is that it **helps us to rethink our own understanding of embodiment and relationship.** As the divine became human in the body of Jesus, we can reclaim healthy connections between the body and the spirit, the goodness of our embodiment.

Likewise, Jesus' incarnation makes possible the human ability to **live in relationship with one another in ways that we incarnate God's love for humanity.**

The remarkably poetic words found in the prologue of the Gospel of John (chapter 1) help us to learn about our own vocation, as Christians, in our time and place. **You and I, like John, are also called to a life and ministry that bears witness and testifies to God's Word and Light.** Now, I agree that sounds more like an approach taken by Baptists, where it is not uncommon to hear phrases like, "Can I get a witness?" or, "Who would like to come up front and share their testimony?" Yet while that may not be the Presbyterian style, we still need to explore **how in our own way, as individuals and as a congregation, we can bear witness and give testimony to the Light of God within us, within others, and in the world around us.**

How, for instance, can we testify to God's presence during this consumeristic time of year as we approach Christmas. How can we make a counter-cultural claim that dislocates the consumption of things, even when we offer these things as Christmas presents. (Yes, I know I'm stepping on toes here, including my own.) In other words, **do we find a greater sense of our own identity in and through the things we have and the positions we hold, rather than our identity as children of God – as children of the Light?**

Let us never forget, as we learn to embody and reflect that Light that dwells within each one of us through our words and actions and relationships, that we are also bearing witness to God's Light. How can we live our lives then in ways that nurture our own humanity – especially the capacity to love our enemies – and to act humanely,

offering compassionate and restorative justice? **Each and every one of us have a responsibility both to be persons who reflect the Light of Christ and to live in such a way that our lives proclaim the Light of Christ in the world.** How will you bear witness to, point to, and reflect the Light of Christ, the light of God's love, justice, peace, compassion, hope and joy in your daily life?

Is there anything in your and my life that may be acting as a hindrance to being able to reflect that Light? If so, perhaps some adjustments need to be made in our own thoughts and behaviors. Perhaps it's that we need to remember who is the source of that Light. **Perhaps we need to allow that Light to enter into our own darkness. For yes, there are dark places within each of us. The good news is that there is indeed Light available to shine upon us, within us, and to reflect off of us.**

Today I stand among you as a witness 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." So perhaps if some Sunday morning I get a wild hair and ask if I can get a witness, many of you will feel compelled to raise your hands, instead of thinking I've lost my mind.

Let us all be more intentional to bear witness and reflect the Light.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Third Sunday of Advent, Year B, Theological Perspective by Marcia Y. Riggs.