

John 1:6-8, 19-28 Pastor Bill Uetricht 12/16/17 3 Advent

Because of my work and probably because of the growing number of my years I frequently reflect on what it means to get older. Recently, I had a couple of experiences which focused my reflection, caused me to think more about the ways we age. One of the experiences was with a dear man who seems to deal with his aging, and frankly, his deteriorating health, by getting more opinionated, angrier with those who disagree with him. Increasingly, life for him is about those who agree with him and those who don't. For me, it's a sad way to make one's way toward death, but it is a way that some of participate in. Anger, defending yourself, and rallying your troops—these are a temptation to those who are dealing with life's demise.

The other experience I had was with another dear man for whom life has been quite tough lately. His health is challenging. The air is cold. His wife is not what she once was. And the world to him appears quite scary. He's afraid of global war, something with which he had had a lot of experience. Life for him looks very bleak. Despair seems to be on the tip of his tongue. One of the temptations of aging and the movement toward death *is* despair.

Now I don't tell these stories to denigrate these gentlemen. Not at all. The pain that they know is very real. Their reactions to the way life takes away its vitality from us are common. I share these stories because they reflect the darkness that all of us know. Defensiveness, despair, anger are all ways for us to embody the darkness that is all around us and within us. Darkness is real. It is not some imagined reality; it is what the whole human race encounters.

The Gospel of John in today's gospel reading tells us that there happened, there appeared a man who was sent from God, John was his name. This happening, this man, came as a witness to the light, so that all, the whole human race, might trust God through him. This John guy, he was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light,

the light that is from God, the light which democratically brings light to everyone—this light was said to be coming onto the scene.

Now, light only makes sense if there is darkness. Light would make no difference if darkness did not exist. The reality of the true light coming into the world suggests that the world must be filled with all kinds of darkness. And it is. For the Gospel of John, the darkness that is its primary concern is the darkness of the lack of faith--trust in the God whom the Gospel believes is acting in a new way in Jesus. For John, the darkness is primarily about not seeing well, not seeing what God is revealing in the person of Jesus. John's congregation probably included some folks who thought John the Baptist was the big deal and who definitely weren't ready to put their money down on Jesus. His audience probably had some Jewish folks who were sitting on the fence; they weren't ready yet to embrace Jesus in his totality. For the gospel writer John, that was a matter of darkness, a lack of faith in a God who was up to something new.

Darkness is not limited simply to that. It takes different shape for different people and different cultures. In today's first reading from Isaiah, the darkness assumed is the darkness of exile, of not being home. This portion of Isaiah follows up on the second portion where the exiles were told that they could come home. They had been separated from their roots, from the sources of their religious practice, from everything they knew as home. They were invited by Second Isaiah to come home. And now, in third Isaiah, they are home, but home isn't what they expected it to be. Even though they are home, they are still mourning in Zion, in Jerusalem. They look around, and they see that the buildings they knew are still in rubble, and the temple they treasured is still flattened. Coming home wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

Darkness can sometimes mean lack of home. Darkness can sometimes include feeling as if you don't belong, as if you don't have a place called home, as if home is as far away as another country. And darkness can also include not feeling at home with yourself. It can

involve realizing that you can't go home, that home sometimes isn't the magical place that you thought it might be. One of the great challenges of the Christmas season is the realization that home and family sometimes can be disappointing, that there is a lot of mourning that goes on around family and home at this time of the year. The darkness is real.

In the second reading, the darkness being addressed is the darkness that comes when you lose the sense of urgency about life and then end up living in ways that are destructive and are not a matter of what the Bible calls "holiness." The people receiving Paul's Thessalonian correspondence are folks who are deeply disappointed because Jesus hasn't returned, as they thought he would. They are wondering whether all this faith stuff is really worth it. When you live with deep disappointment, you often start to lose your edge; you begin living in darkness, behaving poorly, following all kinds of people, even if they are evil or goofy. Paul wants his audience to maintain their edge. He doesn't want them to give into darkness.

Sometimes darkness looks like disappointment. Sometimes it resembles bad choices, living not out of holiness, but out of impurity, thinking and acting only on the basis of what *you* want, what meets *your* needs, fills *your* desires. Sometimes darkness looks like bad behavior: drinking yourself into oblivion, responding to people simply on the basis of what you are thinking or feeling at the moment, caring only about *your* sexual impulses, using those impulses to control or hurt others. Sometimes darkness looks like a culture that loses civility, cannot control its impulses, fosters self-preoccupation, lives in antagonism and the search for war. Darkness is real.

The realness of darkness is why the prospect of the appearance of the light is such good news, so meaningful. I think many of you will agree that the final part of the Christmas Eve service is one of your favorite experiences in worship throughout the whole year. When we stand, light our candles, and sing "Silent Night," there is a power in that experience that taps into something very deep. Yes, it is about memory;

it connects us to the past. But the splendor of the light touches us deeply, makes us joyful, not simply in an aesthetic or sentimental way, but rather as a symbol that speaks to the depths of our existence, the depths of the darkness that is so real, that belongs not only to other people, but to us. We live in a dark world. The darkness is within us. The light of Christmas Eve penetrates the darkness we know too well. The message of today is that light is on its way. John is bearing witness to it. He is preparing us for it. The one who is not the prophet, not Elijah, not the Messiah, is making the way for the one who is the Messiah, who is the light of the world.

It's interesting to me that the gospel writer John tells us that the one who is the light of the world is the Word that was there at the beginning of creation. To connect to Jesus is to connect to the eternal, to that which was from the beginning, that which comes from beyond ourselves. Another of the reasons why I think that the lit Christmas candles on Christmas Eve mean so much to us has to do with the ability of the fire to get us in touch with the light that comes from eternity—in other words, the light that does not come from us, does not come from our ability to manage or control the darkness. It comes from outside of ourselves. Rudolf Bultmann says that “the eternal light never becomes a light that belongs to this world. It can never become our possession (try possessing the fire), a quality of our nature, a property of our character. It can only be received—and only be received again and again—as a gift.” The light that is on its way is the light from God, not from us. This is the light that truly can lighten our darkness.

Joseph Sittler tells one of my favorite Christmas stories, a story that I have shared many times before. It is a story that speaks of an older day when Christmas came with a “special splash of wonder,” a day when candy wasn't omnipresent and thus was thought to be a special treat. This treat, in Sittler's story, came on the day of the annual children's Christmas program, when kids got to speak a piece, were dressed as angels, shepherds, and the wise men. Sittler points out that “the boys seldom made the angels ranks.” They played the Wise Men

dressed in costumes borrowed from the “local Elks, Masons, or Moose.” Or they were shepherds, whose costumes presented no problem: “beat up bathrobes were always available.”

Sittler says that many families at Christmas time were “hosts to a once-a-year visit by an old grandfather or other relative who came along to the program, and was sometimes a lurid character. My grandfather,” he says, “was always in sober broadcloth, white vest, and elk’s tooth suspended from a gold chain, exuding a most unchristian aroma of one-hundred-proof bourbon over the whole congregation. But he, too, perhaps remembering more innocent days and ways, sang out with everyone else who was there: ‘How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.’”

He, too. You, too. This dark old world, too. The struggling and deteriorating man who is angry and who needs to rally his troops, too. My dear friend who looks around and sees reason for nothing but despair, too. The wondrous gift is being given to all—all in darkness. John the Baptist helps us see that the light is on its way. Rejoice!