

John 1: 10-18 “Out of the Darkness, Into the Light” 1/5/20 Rev. Janet Chapman

Some of you may remember August 21, 2017 – the date of the total solar eclipse for a large swath of the United States. The media hype was huge. Towns in the path of totality readied for an onslaught of people. Those special solar glasses needed to view the cosmic occurrence sold out. Many, including our own Souders, traveled a few hundred miles to be in the path of totality and experience the 160.2 seconds when the moon completely covered the sun and the skies went dark. As the moon covered the sun, crowds of onlookers spontaneously cheered and even wept, overwhelmed by the beauty, the scale, and the wonder of experiencing darkness in the middle of day. That brief moment of shared awe created community, unity, and a collective experience too big, too rare not to transform many folks’ perception of their place in the universe and their relationship to one another. There are days when I simply wish for a solar eclipse to jolt us back to that reality and its ability to connect us all as neighbors. In those 160.2 seconds, we experienced the wondrous, cosmic interplay of light and darkness which gives us a hint at the awe and wonder our author John is trying to portray in his prologue. It is poetry and as is so often the case, poetry is better experienced than explained.

Experience the first 8 verses as translated by scholar Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:  
*“The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. Everything was created through him, nothing – not one thing!- came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness, the darkness couldn’t put it out. I wonder if you have ever experienced complete darkness? Last week, when my eye troubles surfaced, I initially had to lay very quiet primarily in the dark to aggravate the situation until I could see a*

specialist. You may have guessed that I am not particularly good at being quiet. On Monday, the ophthalmologist got me right in and I was placed in a completely dark room, not even light from the hallway was visible from under the closed door. I don't remember such darkness, except maybe when the lights went out in my neighborhood during last February's "Snowmageddon." There is nothing to be done – you simply wait it out because darkness has a way of incapacitating you. Literally unable to see what you are doing, all the usual activities stop. At first it can seem charming and romantic, but as the freezer defrosts, the house chills to bone cold, and the limits of cooking with a camp stove grow old, things get uncomfortable and tiresome. Back in the doctor's office, the doctor came in and shone a very bright light into my dilated eyes and instantly they teared up – the intensity was unnerving and for a second, I wanted the darkness back. But that quickly faded as the doctor started nodding his head saying, "I see the problem..." Even the pain of sudden intense light can fade when we start to get an understanding of our situation. He went on to explain, "Your retina has a small tear in it which has created something of a tail and every time you see those flashes, it is like you are wagging the tail." Well then, I am just going to stop wagging as much. You see, when we are in the dark, understanding what is going can be empowering, enlightening, even life-giving. Interestingly, another translation for verse 5 of our text is "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." Rather than the darkness has not overcome the light, the original Greek can also be translated "the darkness has not understood it." I wonder how that translation changes your perception of this text? For me over this past week, it is pivotal. Once I understood what was affecting my vision, I could cope better, I knew what to watch out for and what was inconsequential; my fears weren't getting the best of me as comprehension

added much needed light. The light shone in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. Scholar John Shore notes that the tense of these verbs is also important. It doesn't say "so far the darkness hasn't understood the light;" it doesn't say "the darkness has generally failed to understand the light," it doesn't say "some of the darkness has understood." It is very clear – the darkness has not understood the light, it has never understood it. Not then, not now, and very possibly as John is saying, not ever. It is a sad, human statement from a person who watched his dear and precious friend, a source of Light and Life, the man he knew to be God in the flesh, beaten and nailed to the cross, left to die. Darkness will never understand the Light and likewise will never overcome it. These are powerful words for those of us who have found ourselves stuck in the dark.

Those first verses, therefore, have set the tone for the remainder of John's Prologue, which Kathleen read for us. Here we find a summary of the entire Gospel and within it, one verse which sums up the entire prologue in vs 14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Turning back to Eugene Peterson, I love what he does with this verse: "The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish." The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. I was drawn back to the neighborhood I grew up in Wichita, KS. Even when it was dark, there were always porch lights and street lights on all so us kids played outside well after dark. We knew every neighbor on the block, we played kickball in the street, and block parties happen regularly where folks sat out on their front lawns, shared food and drink and good conversations. It is what I think of

when I read “The Word was made flesh and moved into the neighborhood,” that South Wichita, low income, blue collar neighborhood. It wasn’t fancy and there were a few houses we knew to stay away from. In many ways, it was not fit for the Cosmic Word of God, but Christ moved into my neighborhood anyway. The beauty here is that Christ moves into every neighborhood: from barrio street corners to Gold Coast condos, from ghetto projects to suburban mansions, from the streets of South Central LA to the affluence of Palm Springs, from the borders down south to Mt Shasta, from war-torn Africa and enslaved Iran to the extravagance of Dubai. The Word dwells with all of us in our neighborhoods.

Like any good poet, John loves his words to have two or three meanings. Whenever you read this Gospel, you have to remember it is to be experienced more than explained. As John portrays Jesus’ Life as being the Light of all people, it is not just a physical but a spiritual light. Even when it feels as if the darkness is overcoming or winning in our lives, the darkness will never destroy the Light that lives in each us through the Holy Spirit. It can’t be overcome by our own darkness even if we try to put it out or shove it in a corner or hide it under a bushel. There is no wick in that candle that will eventually end, no oil that will run dry, it can’t be turned off with a switch. We cannot destroy it and shouldn’t even try, no matter how painful the illumination is. Even as we struggle with suffering, illness, changing circumstances, and unknown pressures, we are assured of God’s Light to live by every day. We are promised God’s presence and goodness which darkness will never overcome nor understand. It is God’s Love that brings us out of the darkness and into the Light, from eclipse to understanding. It is God’s Love that moves into the neighborhood, yours and mine, true from start to finish, generous inside and out, and that my friends is good news of great joy for all people.