

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Last week we heard from John the Baptist as told by the gospel of Mark. Again we hear about John the Baptist, this week from the gospel of John. There are similarities and there are differences because the two writers come from different points of view. Mark was the first gospel writer and he wanted to get the information about the life of Jesus spread quickly. He wrote in Greek so that new converts to Christianity, and non-Jewish people could learn about Jesus. John too was writing both for Jews and gentiles, but his purpose was to elevate the status of Jesus as the Son of God rather than simply being a source of information.

The differences between John's gospel introduction of John the Baptist and Mark's are that in John we are not given a description of John's attire or diet as did Mark, and Mark also stressed repentance whereas the gospel of John makes it clear that John the Baptist is not the Messiah but the one who points to Jesus as the light in the darkness.

Darkness can be very uncomfortable. About the only time we welcome total darkness is when we are trying to sleep, and even then, should we need to make a trip to the bathroom in the middle of the night it is difficult to navigate in the dark. The season of Advent is a time when our days are growing shorter and the dark nights are longer. It is a time of shadows, of waiting, of longing — and also a time for finding hope in the darkness.

Driving in the dark gets more difficult as we age. But there was a time when I was amazed on a very dark night. I was returning home to the parsonage in Atlantic, PA (which is half-way between Meadville and Greenville), when I took a different route on my way home from Meadville. As I navigated a 90 degree turn in the road, I saw what looked like someone had strung twinkling Christmas lights on the bushes at the side of the road. I came to a complete stop. This was a very rural, dirt road with no other traffic so I turned off my headlights, leaving my parking lights on, and I watched the natural display and felt intense joy, as, what had to be thousands of fireflies, lit up the darkness.

I was reminded of this display when driving west on 12<sup>th</sup> Street in broad daylight last week as the sunlight reflected from the chests of a flock of sea gulls creating what seemed to be pinpoints of light making patterns in the morning sky. Lights in the day reminded me of lights in the night, which reminded me of Christmas lights. And they remind us of the light John the Baptist testified to as he described the light to come. Jesus was bringing light into a dark world. John the Baptist was sharing what he knew about Jesus so that others have the opportunity to know Jesus as well.

Who in your life has brought the light, the knowledge of Jesus to you? Who witnessed to you so that you could learn and grow in your faith? Maybe it was your parents, or grandparents. Maybe it was a Sunday school teacher who made an impression on you. Maybe it was your spouse, as was what happened with my really good friends. When they were first married, the wife, even though she was divorced with a child, had a strong Christian faith. Her husband was a non-believer. As he watched her interact, discipline, and share her faith with her son, her husband observed how she handled situations and how her faith was reflected in everything she did. He was so impressed that he decided there must be something to believing in Jesus and living a Christian life, so he became a Christian. Pastors Kim Hersh and Karen Lundwell told a story of faith sharing they experienced when they were on a short trip in New York City. Their trip extended over a week end so for worship they visited St James Lutheran Church which is located in the base of a skyscraper. While there a woman told the story about a young girl

asking her why she wears a cross, wondering if she is Catholic. The woman told the girl who asked her, "No, I'm Lutheran. I wear the cross because God loves me, and to be a part of that love I need a reminder. The cross keeps me reminded of the Love of God." Our words and actions do matter. We can be a light in someone's world. We can give them the hope of salvation from sin, and a better life not only in the life to come, but also in this life here on earth.

Becoming a Christ-follower will not make your life easier, in fact it may even become harder as you change, and your friends don't understand why. But becoming a follower of Jesus means a different style of caring for others. It means selfless acts of kindness. It means a new understanding of death. It means that you can live through pain and adversity knowing that you are not alone, you have the strength of God through Jesus Christ standing with you through the Holy Spirit who lives within you.

Maybe you aren't a new Christian. Maybe you've been a Christ-follower long enough to know the times of darkness, what is known as the dark night of the soul. Every spiritual journey has its share of ups and downs, and when things reach their lowest, it's known as the "dark night of the soul." While never easy, the dark night of the soul is an essential part of spiritual growth and is sure to teach you some hard-fought lessons. It's a time when everything seems to be against us, even though we are doing everything we can to keep from drowning. It is a time of breaking away from the illusions of fear and ego to shift our alignment and values to what is real and true, the connection to the divine, and ultimately brings us to a stronger faith in God.

As the dark night of the soul comes to an end there is a sense of peace, understanding and wholeness with a greater understanding of life, the lessons learned and the wounds that were healed. When we transform the pain and suffering into wisdom which enables us to move forward, we have even more light to share with the world by the experience we've had. Even though it may seem as though you are doing all the work to climb out of this darkness, this is all work done by God and for God's purpose through the work of the Holy Spirit. And, believe it or not, there will come a time of thankfulness for this season of darkness.

Living out of a sense of gratitude gives us a sense of hope and joy. We find hope and joy in the incarnation. God took on flesh to learn what it is like to live as a human; to better understand our hurt, our desires, our needs. We find hope and joy in knowing that even though there is suffering in the world God understands humanity and will never leave us or desert us. In our second reading, the one from 1 Thessalonians Paul exhorts us to live a life in the Spirit which includes joy, prayer, thanksgiving, goodness, that which is lifegiving and the will of God. God's Spirit comes to us, but we are reminded by Paul that we need to nurture the Spirit, not ignore it, or it will die. Remember to give God thanks before and after you receive what you need. Test everything, use discernment, and hold onto what is good. God will work for the good of those who love him. It's not what you can do for yourself, it is Christ working in us through grace. God is faithful, God will do this, we are participants not idle watchers waiting for change to happen, nor are we the power behind the work, that's God.

As we continue our journey through the night before Christmas, the Advent season we will soon arrive at the manger and we will find the newness that comes with the incarnation, with God among us and we remember that we find our hope and joy in a God who does this because God is faithful.

All glory be to God.