



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
"At Home" Worship
December 13, 2020

Gathering Around God's Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At-Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

Call to Worship

The days are shorter and darkness is part of our lives.

Lord, hear our prayers through the darkness.

Place your hope in God's mercy and love.

Lord, we seek your presence among us.

Look closely! God is making us ready.

Brighten our Spirits this day, and help us to receive your Good News.

OPENING HYMN

On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry

#96

CALL TO CONFESSION

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Therefore, in faith and humility, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION.

Loving God, you sent Jesus among us as the light of the world. We confess that sometimes the darkness in our lives overcomes the light. Help us, O God, that we may reflect the light of Jesus in the world. Amen

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

New Testament Reading: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 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. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.

ANTHEM

SERMON

“Light and Darkness”

Rev. David Ukropina

I’ve mentioned before that this text from John is his version of the nativity story. As one pastor noted, if we based a Christmas pageant just on the fourth gospel, it would feature just a single child, speaking one line, “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.”

While that would save a lot of pageant preparation on costumes and props, it wouldn’t be a very detailed story. And that would also leave out a lot from the rest of today’s reading from John Chapter 1, which moves from the word becoming flesh to the witness of John the Baptist who testifies to the light.

A central part of our reading today is when the gospel tells us that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” I’ve always been intrigued by this verse, and the way the themes of light and darkness continue throughout John’s gospel.

Those images of light and darkness are endlessly symbolic and resonant during any time of the year, but especially around Christmas time. Whether we acknowledge it or not, light and darkness have always been present around the Christmas narrative. We tend to focus on the happy stuff and the hopeful stuff, but the nativity story also includes Herod’s murderous rage, the slaughter of the innocents and the desperate flight into Egypt.

And the way I hear this story speaking to us today is the way it affects our lives as Christians and as worshippers. Christian faith is not always about being happy, either this time of year or any time of year. I don’t

want to put other churches down, but have you ever noticed the way that some churches are just relentlessly optimistic? It's like you have to just be smiling all the time.

I don't always feel like smiling, especially as I look out upon a world that falls so far short of the glory of God. I also don't always feel like smiling because it's just not biblical. While we are called to hope and to trust the promises of God, you do not have to be happy all the time. We can be sad and faithful. We can be angry and faithful. We can be grieving and faithful.

All we have to do is read the psalms sometime. They are filled with every emotion under the sun; grief, loneliness, sadness, anger, pain, but being right there in scripture is God's way of saying that is ok. Those emotions are real and non-negotiable. That's the thing about emotions. They're just there. You can try to shove them down, but they don't go away, and if you try to shove them down, they usually just pop up somewhere else.

I'll never forget a book I once read by a Lutheran pastor named Kenneth Haugk who began Stephen Ministry. His book was titled *Do Not Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*. The title came from proverbs 25 verse 20, which reads, "Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart."

That verse reminded me of something that happened to me once. It was in an interview for a church position, and one of the search committee members told me he had a friend whose wife had died, and now the man was doubting the very existence of God because he was grieving so much, and this man interviewing me wanted to know what I would say to his friend as a pastor.

I took a long pause and a deep breath, and then I said, "Sometimes it's hard to feel God's presence, when your heart is broken." The man started crying, and then I wondered if his friend was really him. I paused again, but went on to say that "God is there." Sometimes when we're grieving, God can be hard to see or feel, but it's kind of like a flashlight that can get covered up. The light is on, but it can get obscured sometimes."

These things are true all the time, but they can be especially true at Christmas. I've mentioned before that America and Americans are almost relentlessly optimistic, especially at Christmas, and it can feel alienating to be around, especially when one is in grief, and we all have known that experience of grief in our lives.

So as we consider all of this passage from the first chapter of John, how does it speak to us today? One thing that I often notice about the fourth gospel's portrayal of John the Baptist is that before he gets around to baptizing, John is really first described more as a witness. We read in the passage that John came to testify to the light.

In a way, he might have been called John the Witness rather than John the Baptist, and John makes clear that his baptism is one that points the way to the one who is coming, one for whom he was not worthy to untie his sandals.

And as we think about what effect this passage would have on us, it really points us in the direction of being witnesses. We are called by this passage and really all of scripture to witness to the light of the world, the light that was coming into the world at Christmas time.

I remember a few years ago, I was leading a children's moment, and I asked one child to hold a lit flashlight and point it at another child who was holding a small mirror. We played around a bit with moving the reflection around on the floor, but then I asked the kids who we were in this illustration.

At first, they looked at me a little confused, but then I said, we are the mirror. And then I asked who is the light? And of course, the right answer, as usual, was Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world, and it's our job to reflect that light. We are not the light ourselves, but as Christians, we reflect the light of Christ into the world.

So how do we do that? Well, there are a lot of ways, but one way is just in being the church, and remaining a worshipping community in the world with a presence where we are. This sounds like a simple thing, but I don't think it's a simple thing remaining a church in this day and age and during the pandemic.

We've all felt the loss and absence of worshipping together in the sanctuary, but I am grateful for people continuing to worship and pray at home as believers who are bound together, and we look forward to the time of reunion when we can be back together. In the meantime, I do not take for granted that we remain a community of believers.

In many ways, being a church in the 21st century is a counter-cultural act. It is at any time, but especially during Advent and December, when consumerism and consumption threaten to take over the whole

message of light and spirit during this time. The birth of Jesus is a reminder that we make a counter-claim to all the claims of purely secular society.

Another way we remain witnesses, besides continuing to be the church and to be witnesses to the light of Christ, is simply to not give in to the darkness. All of us at any time, but especially during the pandemic, can be tempted to give into darkness and despair. That doesn't mean we can't feel these things, but in witnessing to the light of Christ, we witness that the light survives even the greatest forces of darkness.

Of course, one other way we reflect the light is just by being and acting like the light in the world. We practice small works of kindness and grace in the world. I'm more and more convinced of the importance of just every day kindness and decency, and also of the destructiveness of just meanness and a lack of kindness.

During this pandemic, we are all feeling more fatigued and maybe a bit more crabby than even usual, but it's so important to try and stay kind in the world. And if we feel like we don't have the energy to do that, it helps to remember that ultimately, the power and the light to remain kind and loving in the world don't originally come from us, but they come from beyond us.

And that's where I hear the text speaking to us today. We need to uncover and recapture the message that in the middle of the darkness, there is light and hope. It doesn't mean the darkness is not there. John's gospel acknowledges the presence of the darkness. It is there, but our Christian journey is one of both darkness and light. It's one of both crucifixion and resurrection.

It's there in both the pain and the agony Mary felt in childbirth but also the joy of new life where there was none. God bless all of you on your journeys of darkness and light, and in this season, may you feel and reflect the love of Christ, who is the light of the world.

Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH – The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Loving God, in this season of light, we lift up in prayer so many who wait in darkness: people who face poverty...political upheaval...struggle within families...

Right what is wrong among us and in us and restore us to you, to others, and to ourselves.

Make the brokenhearted whole again... comfort those who mourn... repair our damaged cities...

In all the busyness of these days, do not let us lose sight of you or those whom you came to serve: people who are in need of healing... people overlooked and underserved...the ones who are lost...

Light of the world, live among us always, full of grace and truth. And now we pray as Jesus taught us...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and

lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Savior of the Nations, Come

#102

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49