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John 1:6-13

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HARK! THE HERALD

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, the season set aside by the Church to remember and celebrate the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Advent marks the beginning of the traditional church year. This is the time when we turn the page, so to speak, when we close the door on the failures and victories of the previous year and begin anew. This is the time when we look with fresh eyes on the coming of Jesus and embrace again the hope and joy and peace that we have in Christ as we begin another year of our faith journey.

My wife and I will celebrate the Christmas holiday with our three grandchildren. The oldest two are almost three years old, so our Christmas will revolve around these two little boys and their wide-eyed response to this magical time of trees and lights, ornaments and food, presents and singing and nativity scenes. Their hearts and minds will be ablaze with wonder and amazement. Once again grandpa will have to rise way too early on Christmas morning.

This reminds me that the purpose of Advent is to look afresh through children's eyes at the wonder and amazement of a magical star, wise men and shepherds, angels proclaiming the glory of God, a child being born to a virgin, and God himself coming to live among us and save us. Every year my heart is warmed and my eyes mist over from watching movies like *White Christmas*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which George Bailey discovers what the world would be like if he had never been born. In a much deeper and more profound way, however, singing familiar hymns and retelling the story during Advent is designed to warm our hearts with hope and gratitude and assurance that God loves us and that he is with us. God is not indifferent to human pain. He longs to give us true and eternal life.

Our Scripture text for this Advent is the first 18 verses of the gospel of John, the prologue to the fourth gospel. This amazing text sets out the themes of John's account. Last week, Bernard Bell took verses 1-5; our study this morning focuses on verses 6-13.

There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (NAS 95)

I. Witness of John

Three themes catch our attention here. First, the witness of John the Baptist. This man is so familiar to John's readers that he need only refer to him as John. Each of the gospel writers includes John's witness or testimony to Jesus. Mark begins his gospel with John the Baptist, and Luke includes his birth narrative. John was the fulfillment of Isaiah 40, the "voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord."

The writer sets out four things about John the Baptist. Firstly, he was "sent" or commissioned by God, just as Moses and the prophets, and Jesus himself, were "sent" (John 3:17). Secondly, his message was a witness to the Light. The word "witness" or testimony occurs here once as a noun and twice as a verb (testify). There are many other witnesses mentioned in John: the Samaritan woman (4:39), the beloved disciple (19:35; 21:24), the works of Jesus (5:36; 10:25), the Old Testament (5:39-40), the Father (5:32, 37; 8:18), and Jesus himself (18:37).

Thirdly, John's goal or purpose was that all might believe in his witness, and therefore through him believe in Jesus. Fourthly, John makes it clear that the Baptist was not the "Light," but merely a signpost pointing to the Light. John's testimony was that he must decrease and Jesus must increase; that he was not worthy to untie the thong of Lord's sandal; and that after him was coming one who was greater, because he existed before him. John baptized in water, but Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit. John's testimony, which in this book begins in verse 19, was to direct attention to the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Earlier we sang "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"—a very fitting song for the ministry of John, who heralded the arrival of the true Light.

In the same way that John was a witness, so also is the Advent season. For several weeks leading up to Christmas, everything changes. Lights and ornaments are on sale in the stores; Christmas tree lots spring up all over the place. The music we hear on our radios and in the department stores is completely different but wonderfully familiar. Houses and streets are decorated with lights—even entire blocks are lit up. None of this happens at any other time of the year. In our house, things from the far reaches of the attic suddenly appear—nutcrackers, wreaths, little Santas, a gingerbread house, stockings, a nativity scene, and a sign that has but one word: BELIEVE. Every year this conglomeration of décor seems to increase. I wonder how we acquired such a potpourri of articles. The answer, of course, is, my wife. Every year I wonder why we need to buy more lights.

Granted, we can do without the busyness, the pressure of shopping, the anticipation of being with broken families and the daily

sales reports. But for a time during Advent season, everything changes. No matter if the words “Merry Christmas” or “Baby Jesus” are not spoken, or if the lyrics to “Joy to the Word” or “O Come, All Ye Faithful” are not sung, or the public display of crèche scenes is forbidden by law, everyone knows why Christmas exists. Once a year, every year, Advent gives witness to the fact that something remarkable, something special and life-changing happened in human history—and everybody knows what that is. As Rikk Watts reminded us at our recent singles retreat, Christianity is not an idea or a philosophy, but an event.

II. The Coming of the True Light

The second theme that captures our attention is that the true Light came into the world. “Light,” used four times in our text, refers back to verse 4: “in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.” John is equating the Light with the Word. The Word that was with God in the beginning, the Word that was God, the Word that was the agent of creation now has come into the world. As John will say in verse 14, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Or, as Eugene Peterson put it so beautifully, God “moved into the neighborhood” (*The Message*).

The Word that became flesh is the true light. Throughout history there have been other lights: people who have spoken the word of the Lord, people who have called upon the Lord, people who have called men to repent and turn to God, like John the Baptist. But when the Word became flesh, the true Light came into the world. All other lights are secondary and provisional. Some lights are even misleading and false. But the true Light is “the Light,” because this Light is the ultimate self-disclosure of God to man and this Light is life-giving. No other light has the ability to give life to men. No one has life in himself, except the true Light, the God who became a man.

James Finley put it this way: “The world is the place where we meet God because it is the place where God meets us in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ did not merely inhabit human flesh; he became flesh. He made himself, as God, to be one with humanity in the concrete historical realities of human life.”¹

Advent is the time of year when we retell, repeat and relive the story of how the Word, the Light, Jesus, entered into the world of humanity. God did not come in a spaceship or an airplane. He did not come as a nine-foot tall mighty warrior. He did not come in a grand procession. He was conceived supernaturally to a teenage girl and entered the world as a baby born to two obscure people finding shelter among the habitation of animals. There was no hospital, there were no grandmas and grandpas, no passing out of cigars. All that was heard was the squeal of new life, joined with the moaning of oxen. God came in the form of a 7-pound baby with dirty diapers.

T. S. Eliot has a striking verse in his poem *Ash Wednesday* that captures the absurdity, the ridiculousness and hilarity of God’s entrance into humanity:

The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and

Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

The Word without a word; the silent Word. Eliot is saying that the Word that was in the beginning present with God, the Word that was eternal and divine in relationship with God, the Word that was the expression of God, this Word entered the world as a baby who could not speak a word. But this silent Word became the center of the whirling world. It is difficult to grasp the reality of the incarnation. Who would conceive of such a plan? Who can fathom this mystery? What does this say about God? At this point we cease being theologians and become worshippers in awe and amazement.

What evokes awe and wonder for us? Certainly creation does. Growing up in Nebraska, there was no oceanfront property. As a boy I saw pictures of oceans and read about them, but I never saw an ocean. When I moved to California at 22, every time I drove within sight of the ocean it took my breath away. It still does today. When we are at the beach I never tire of watching the sunset.

How about watching the birth of a child? To me, nothing in creation compares to the wonder and awe I experienced when my children were born. Watching the arrival of my children, seeing them for the first time and holding them in my arms was marvelous beyond words.

But even that pales in comparison to the arrival of the Christ-child. Advent affords us the opportunity to reflect again on the glory of the incarnation. We read about Jesus, study about Jesus and talk about Jesus, but Advent, more than any time of the year, simply evokes adoration. It still takes our breath away and re-centers our whirling world around God.

III. The Light Shines and Forces a Response

The third theme that John stresses is that when the true Light came into the world, it was so bright that it forces a response from every person. Every one must make a choice either to reject the Light or receive the Light.

John continues to draw on the imagery from Genesis 1. In the beginning the earth was in darkness: “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep ... God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen 1:2-4).

When the true Light came into the world, the world was again in darkness, not physically but spiritually. In John’s gospel the world is portrayed as humanity in rebellion against God, living separate and apart from God. The life of God cannot grow or be supported in spiritual darkness, just as plant life cannot grow without the light of the sun. Light is necessary to support life.

But God loves the world, and so he spoke the Word into the world just like he did the sun: “let there be light.” This Light was his very own son who was always with him. This Light was not a flashlight or a light bulb. The true Light is of such magnitude that it shines like the sun, illuminating every person on the planet.

The word “enlighten” (v 9) is the same word that is translated “shine” in verses 5. The Light shines in the darkness. The Light enlightens every man. Man cannot ignore the Light just as man cannot blot out the sun. This Light is the Light of the world. This Light is life-giving. Every person must respond, to reject or receive, to hate or love the Light.

One response is to reject the Light. This is what happened when the true Light came to earth. John says that the Light came into the very world that he created but the world did not know him, did not recognize him. Imagine arriving at the home of your children, your very own offspring, and having the door slammed in your face!

The Word came to “his own,” i.e., either his own people, Israel, or his own creation. John probably intends both meanings. Israel had a long history with God. God had been faithful to his people for centuries, despite their idolatry and unfaithfulness, and he continually promised them a savior, a son of David. Israel had anticipated a light shining in the darkness. But when Jesus came to the Jews, they rejected him. He didn’t match their expectations.

However, Israel represents all of us. We want a God who will give us what we desire, and when he doesn’t come through we reject him, we close the door in his face. We are a fallen humanity shrouded in darkness. No matter how brilliant, accomplished, talented or wealthy one becomes, he or she is still in darkness. One only has to follow the news surrounding Tiger Woods to realize that one can gain the whole world but not dispel the darkness in the heart.

Even though the darkness robs humanity of life and produces death, the world still hates and abhors the Light. The world prefers darkness and chooses darkness. Why? Because “men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

Today the Chinese government is cracking down on the vibrant house church movement. Last week, according to the San Jose Mercury news, the police descended on The Golden Lamp Church, a church built to accommodate 50,000 worshippers, “smashing doors and windows, seizing Bibles and sending dozens of worshipers to hospitals with serious injuries.” The co-pastors are in jail, the gates to the church are locked, and an armored vehicle sits outside. Why? Because the world hates the Light.

The world of darkness is a world we know very well. All of us have experienced the darkness in some way or another. A few weeks ago I visited my home in Lincoln, Nebraska, where I went to college. One afternoon I walked around the campus that was my home some 40 years ago. It was a very emotional and difficult time for me. I remembered the darkness of those days when I did not know the Lord. I wondered how my world got so dark. How did I get so lost? John tells us: it is because we reject the Light and choose the darkness.

The good news, the great news, the fantastic news of Advent is that the darkness cannot extinguish the Light, the darkness cannot overcome it. All attempts to extinguish the Light only cause it to grow brighter. When the Light shines, some reject it. But there is another response, and that is to love the Light, to receive

the Light. John uses the verb “receive” 46 times in his gospel. This word is synonymous with the verb “believe,” which occurs a staggering 98 times in John. To receive the Light is to believe in Jesus, to believe that this one is the Word and the true Light. To receive the Light is to have life instead of death. This is the reason for the incarnation, and the whole point of the gospel.

The result of receiving and believing is that we can become a child of God, born of God. Being born of God is one of the central themes of this gospel. Jesus has a conversation about this with Nicodemus, in chapter 3. Jesus makes it clear that being born a child of Abraham doesn’t get you anything. He will tell the religious leadership in very politically incorrect language that they are children of their father the devil.

To be a child of God means we have to be born anew, born again. Every one is born physically, but the rebirth that happens when we receive Jesus is “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man,” or as the TNIV has it, “not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will.” To be a child of God means that we are reborn, we are re-birthing miraculously and supernaturally. The birth of Jesus happened supernaturally, and so too our rebirth is in the end a miracle of God, resulting in new life. Being born of God is not a makeover, but rather becoming something altogether new and different. Once again, God says, “let there be light,” and we become a new creation.

Jesus was born into our world so that we could be born into his. Jesus descended into the darkness so that we could ascend into the light. Jesus came to earth so that we could follow him to heaven. In Jesus we exit the world that hates God and enter a family that loves its Father. Jesus is born and we are reborn in him.

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris’n with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! The herald angels sing
“Glory to the newborn King!”

Advent is the time of year when we respond to the true Light that has come into the world and we receive the Light. The lyrics of a two familiar Christmas hymns give us this encouragement:

No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;

Each day of Advent we hear the message over and over again: Receive the light and life of Jesus. Are you are mired in darkness today? Are you are fearful, confused and doubting? Are you bored? Has your heart has grown cold? The incarnation tells us to come to the Light and receive light and life.

Perhaps you wonder if God really loves you, or if he really can help you or change your life. The miracle of incarnation and the promise of rebirth speaks to us a resounding “Yes!” Our response is to say “Yes” to God. God has come to us so that we might open our lives to him.

Perhaps you wonder if you really can have Christmas joy. Christmas can be a difficult time for many. It is for me. But the incarnation reminds us that joy does not come from opening presents, being with family, or eating lots of food. Our joy comes from seeing the glory of God in the face of an infant born to a virgin.

Let us receive Christ in our hearts today, the Word without a word, within the world, and for the world.

The peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always. (Book of Common Prayer, 1549)

† Merton's Palace of Nowhere, James Finley, quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People* (Nashville: Job and Shawchuck, Upper Room Books), 1990, 44.

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