

The Light Shines in the Darkness

John 1:1-14

Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, we are beginning a new sermon series based on the theme of light and darkness in the Gospel of John. My hope is to increase our knowledge of scripture and to find a helpful word from God each week. Today we want to begin by giving some basic background about the Gospel of John and conclude with what I hope will be a helpful word from today's Gospel reading.

So many people cherish John's gospel for its familiar scripture: "In my Father's house there are many rooms" or "For God so loved the world that God gave his only son." But when you attempt to read John's Gospel, you quickly find yourself shrouded in mystery. Scholars and lay readers alike find John's Gospel confounding and perplexing.

When I attended the theology school at Emory University, I knew very little about my Bible. That was a problem for a lot of students who came from mostly United Methodist churches. At that time, their preaching was more focused on topical preaching and being relevant rather than focusing on scripture. So, in their good wisdom, our theology school had our entire class read through almost the entire Bible. For those of you who have done this, you know that you end up with about as many questions as you do answers. Much is amazing and much is disturbing. I found John's Gospel to be one of the most troubling books in the New Testament.

For one thing, John is so very different in his portrait of Jesus.

- The teachings of Jesus that we so cherish, like the Sermon on the Mount, are missing.
- The many parables so familiar, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, so beloved in the other gospels, are absent.
- Even healing stories of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which reveal Jesus' great compassion, are mostly absent in John's Gospel and when present, they serve a different purpose.
- The order of John's gospel is vastly different. Jesus cleanses the temple early on in His ministry, not in the last week. Jesus is in ministry for two years, not three.
- You simply cannot reconcile the difference of John's Gospel with the other three Gospels. Just compare the crucifixion and the resurrection narratives and tell me what you find.

Then, we have a Jesus who appears more divine and less human. As one of my theology school roommates like to say, Jesus appears to be a God walking a couple of feet off the ground carrying a bible and wearing a halo. This was not a Jesus I could readily identify with. Jesus did not seem real.

- In John's crucifixion narrative, gone is any sense of the pain and suffering that is so prominent of the other three gospels.
- When Jesus says, "I thirst," He says this to fulfill scripture not because He has human thirst as we do.
- When He dies and a spear is thrust into Jesus' side, Jesus bleeds water.

- When He dies, He does not die like a defeated victim brutally crucified on a cross, but He is a victorious King lifted up on the cross like it is a throne for the light of God to shine into the darkness of the world.

When I began my ministry, I found myself struggling to find a way to avoid preaching on the Gospel of John. The readings from John would come up in the lectionary readings every three years and I would usually find myself preaching the Old Testament Readings. But at some point, I started to dip my foot in the strange watering hole that is the Gospel of John and I found my thirst was quenched. Many shifts happened in me that made this discovery possible.

At some point, I accepted that John's Gospel was a different voice in the New Testament. I overcame my disappointment that John's Gospel was not a reiteration of much of the same material I so loved about Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I gave up any need to attempt to reconcile the difference and acknowledged that John had his own unique voice. I was learning to let Matthew be Matthew, Mark be Mark, Luke be Luke, and John be John. Each book of scripture together was the Good News, but each could only give their individual blessings when we suspend our assumptions and expectations and hear their unique voice and perspective.

Then I was greatly aided by the discovery that John's gospel was a narrative theology that is best read like a theatre script written by a brilliant playwright. Like a theatre production, John has developed themes and images, scenes and characters, that come together to take our hearts and minds on a journey into the light of Christ, who came shining into the darkness of our world. Like the best plays ever written and performed, John fully understands our pathos as human beings, our pain, and our struggles. But he, better than any of the other gospels, captures the love and the joy, the friendship, and community. He shows us what it feels like to belong to a loving community of faith. Like the best plays, his message is ultimately a word of hope and possibility. His gospel ends with each of us brought into the narrative and onto the stage where we are asked to draw our own conclusions, by either standing in the light or choosing to remain in the darkness. Now is the time for judgment, not some future time at the end of history. Today we must decide. Do we dare stand in the light that Jesus shines or do we continue to hide in the darkness?

What I want to do during each of the Sundays of Lent is use just one of the many dominant images from the Gospel of John, the image of the light shining in the darkness. We will begin today by learning about the theological theme of the light in the darkness that we find in the Gospel prologue. Then, over the next several weeks, we are going to see how this helpful image of the light shining in the darkness plays itself out in the life of real people and groups of people. In so doing, I pray we all will be willing to stand in the light of Christ.

So today we reflect on this image of light and darkness in the prologue to John's Gospel. It is difficult these days to find any place where there is utter darkness. The last time I experienced utter darkness was the time a bunch of us young pastors went on a canoe trip on the Eleven Point River in Missouri. There is just something theologically wrong about saying the last time you experienced "utter darkness" was on a trip with pastors. We found a trail

that led us to a cave. We walked deep into the cave with our flashlights on until we went as far as we could go. At that point, we turned out the lights. We quickly realized that there was not a single point of light anywhere to be seen, utter darkness. I wondered what would happen should all of our flashlights not work. How would we find our way out and even know where we were? If you have ever experienced utter darkness, you appreciate the power of light.

The Gospel uses the image of light in many different ways.

- Light is what we need to see where we are going. It guides us. We know the Way, the Truth, and the Life because Jesus is the light that shows us the way.
- Light is what we need to see the true nature of things. In the next several weeks, we will see Jesus many times casting His light and revealing truth and falsehood.
- Light is what we need to overcome the powers of darkness. We will see that when Jesus is lifted up on the cross and draws all people to Himself.

John has his own way of talking about salvation. For John, salvation is EN-LIGHT-EN-MENT. Unlike other places in scripture, salvation is NOT something to be had primarily in the future. Salvation happens the moment your eyes are open to see yourself and others, and the political, social, and religious institutions as Jesus sees them. The light of Christ reveals the true nature of things. Our illusions, pretensions, are done away with. We and our world stand before God and all secrets are revealed. In John's Gospel, to accept Jesus as our savior means we accept Him as the WAY to life, the Truth about ourselves and the world, and the LIFE that is what God has always wanted for us. "He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

But the light of Christ does not only reveal the truth. This light of Christ also brings us warmth. That warmth is the warmth of GRACE. In the prologue, we are told, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of truth and GRACE." Truth is not enough. We can dare to stand in the light of Jesus' truth because of GRACE. Jesus, we are told, does not come to condemn but to save the world. So here is my favorite mathematical formula: TRUTH + GRACE = WHAT? LOVE. And at the same time, if you give it a moment's thought, it means intimacy. Now that is the sort of math that I enjoy. We are seen and we are beloved. The world is revealed for what it is. This is not a play about truth-telling that destroys life, but truth-telling that leads us to know how beloved we are. For those of you who are into theatre, John's play is more like the play, "A Raisin in the Sun," where both truth-telling and grace bring healing, rather than "A Street Car Named Desire," where truths are brutally revealing with little grace.

It was years ago that someone I know was traveling and called up some really old friends he had not seen for a really long time. They graciously invited him for wine and dinner at their place. After a wonderful dinner, they started talking, like good old friends do, from the heart about all the things that transpired since they last saw one another. At one point, the husband shared something personal: how the two of them almost did not make it as a couple. He shared about how he had become involved in "an affair of the heart," which he confessed was just as devastating as any other affair. He talked about the shame and the pain it caused them both. She said how angry she was, how deeply injured she felt, and just how very close

she came to writing off her marriage. But both of them decided to see a pastoral counselor they knew.

The first few sessions were predictable. She shared what he had done and how devastated and angry she was. How could he? How dare he? And he continued to confess and beg for forgiveness. This continued for several weeks. Until, in one session, when he had his tail between his legs and had completely put out how he saw his responsibility, the pastoral counselor looked at her and ask one simple question of her: "Now, what was your part in all of this?"

She was stunned to think that she would have any responsibility and, for a moment, just wanted to walk right out of the office. But she stayed and began to share what she had not shared before. She told the truth how long before the affair had happened, she had been pulling away emotionally and not letting him get close, leaving him increasingly isolated.

It was the truth that set them free. But it was the grace that saved them and their marriage. Jesus, the light, is the truth and the grace that opens the doors of salvation because we are invited to come into the light of truth and experience the warmth of grace. We no longer have to hide. We can finally be made whole.

I invite you to join me on our journey together this Lent as we shine the light into the darkness.