

July 12, 2020

John 1: 1-14

Prayer: Dear God, Though it is bright mid-summer, we are living in a time of fear and a time of darkness. We ask that you help us to emerge into your light. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Out of Darkness, A Gift

I have had the good fortune of being able to move out of my office over the course of many weeks. Thank you for not firing me and making me do it in a single afternoon.

I have emptied filing cabinets of 15 years of sermons. I noticed that the typeface went from 12 points in 2005 to 14 points, then 16. Now it's 18 and still a little blurry. I have to retire before I'm up to a word per page.

In glancing over those sermons, I ran into probably 20 Scripture passages that I thought, "Oh, I should've preached on that again!"

So today, I'm going to return to what I think is one of the most profound passages in our holy Scriptures – the prologue to John's

gospel. The coming of light into a dark world.

In the year after I graduated from college, I flew to Honduras to visit a friend in the Peace Corps. She was working in the capital city, Tegucigalpa. After we'd spent some time there, we traveled to a coastal city so she could show me the beaches and the islands.

Visitors from the United States were quite rare in Honduras in 1977, so we made friends everywhere we went. One day, our new friends invited us to an uninhabited island for a day of swimming and snorkeling and cooking big pots of fish stew.

To get to the island, we traveled in 10-foot motorboats down a river and into the open Caribbean Sea. Just about all young Hondurans seemed to have these motorboats and we went in a caravan of three.

We crossed a wide expanse of open ocean and spent the day on a gorgeous, deserted tropical beach. Then in late afternoon, we loaded up the boats and headed back for the mainland. Our boat had to go to another island for gas, so the other boats headed to the mainland

without us.

The five of us in our boat re-fueled, then headed out onto the open sea. But during the afternoon, the sea had gotten a little rougher, and a wave broke over the outboard engine. It sputtered and stopped.

Our captain pulled the starter rope several times, and got it going again. But another wave broke over it, flooding it once again.

This happened over and over. Our captain grew tired. The waves began breaking over the sides of the boat, and we grabbed cups to bail out the water. The little boat, battered by waves, began to drift aimlessly.

And then suddenly, in the blink of an eye, the sun set, and a darkness like I've never seen descended over the ocean. It was as if someone had turned off a light.

We in North America have gotten accustomed to never really having night because of all the streetlights and headlights and houselights and parking lot lights. But near the equator, with no land

and no lights, that dark fell fast.

Stars became visible immediately and they looked close enough to touch. I couldn't see the person in front of me in the boat, but I could see the stars. And they felt like they were right on top of us.

With nightfall, the ocean grew even rougher. The tired captain of our boat pulled the starter cord again and again, but could not get the engine to turn over. We were bailing water as fast as we could, but the waves kept coming.

I could tell that the Hondurans were scared. I thought to myself, "So this is how my life will end, out on the Caribbean, hundreds of miles from home."

And then it felt like the end had indeed come. A huge wave picked up our little boat and flipped it over. We all went flying into the ocean.

But a strange thing happened. We hit bottom. We stood up and we were only in waist-deep water. Somehow, the waves had knocked us back toward land. Though we couldn't see it, a beach had to be yards

away.

We splashed ashore and finally, way off in the distance, we could make out the lights of the mainland. But first we had to cross a lagoon to get there from the island on which we had landed.

We were already soaked, so we entered the lagoon. And I looked down and saw the strangest sight: Tiny blue lights outlined my entire body underwater. They were some kind of tiny algae that produced phosphorescent light. And in that dark, dark place, the only thing I could see was the outline of my body in what looked like blue Christmas lights.

At the time, I wasn't overly thrilled. If I could see me underwater, I figured the sharks could, too.

But we got to the other side of the lagoon, uneaten. As soon as we stepped onto the beach, the phosphorescence disappeared. Faintly, way off in the distance, we could see the lights of the town, so we started trudging along a beach road that the Hondurans seemed to know.

Then up ahead, the lights of the town blinked off, as they did every night at 10 PM when the town turned off its power. And we were plunged into total darkness once again.

Fortunately, by then, the Hondurans were close enough to home that they could guide us without seeing anything at all.

But for me, it was an exercise in darkness, in sight deprivation, that I've never experienced before or since.

It's the kind of darkness that the writer of John's gospel knew from life in ancient Palestine. We moderns have trouble appreciating the completeness of the dark. But the image of darkness that John uses in the prologue to his gospel is a darkness I only glimpsed in Honduras. It is a darkness that is a void, an absence, a black hole.

It is a darkness that existed before God created light.

I'm reading this morning from **John 1: 1-14** to see what happened to this darkness.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 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. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 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.

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.

“In the beginning...” That’s how John starts his story. And all his readers would recognize immediately that those were the same words that began their Holy Scriptures.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light....”

In the beginning, there was a darkness with no streetlights or headlights or houselights or parking lot lights. In the beginning there was darkness with no starlight or Caribbean phosphorescence.

In the beginning, God created light out of the darkness.

The gospel writers Matthew and Luke begin their stories with Jesus's human genealogy. But John goes back millennia before that.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John goes far beyond Jesus' human genealogy to tell us Jesus was with God from the beginning. **“He was in the beginning with God.”**

And he wasn't just there, hanging around, watching. **“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”**

Jesus not only was *with* God, he *was* God. He was the Creator.

The name of this chapel reflects our understanding of a Triune God, a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit all at once, a God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, all at once.

Three in one. Triune.

In the beginning, God created light. And then millennia later, in a definite time and place in history – that is, the first century in the Middle East – **“the Word became flesh and lived among us.”**

In a nutshell, that is the basis of our Christian faith, that God once came and lived among us. Did you hear what Bronwyn sang from Eric Bazilian’s song?

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on a bus
Trying to make his way home.*

Some people might think those lyrics are sacrilegious. I don’t think they are. I think they are the gospel according to John.

A pastor friend of mine used this image in one of his newsletters. He wrote that a good paraphrase of John 1: 14 is: “God got on the bus with us.”

“The Word became flesh and lived among us.”

God got on the bus with us.

Two chapters further into John's gospel, we find perhaps our single most beloved and profound verse in the New Testament. John is still dealing with the incarnation but he changes his metaphor. Jesus is talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus and he says, **"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son...."**

God loved the world so much, Nicodemus, that here's what he did: He gave a gift of incomparable value. His son. And that son would die, he surely would. But the gift would not.

The greatest story ever told is about the greatest gift ever given.

I once asked my family to name the greatest gifts each of them ever received. For Vince ,it was his family's trip each Christmas from dark, snowy eastern Kentucky to light, sunny Miami, Florida.

For Dustin, it was a used Jeep Cherokee she got one Christmas – her first car.

For Taylor, it was a Fender American Stratocaster for his 24th birthday.

For Madison, it was a study abroad trip to Australia during college. That trip gave her the wanderlust to travel and live around the world.

Like Dustin, my greatest physical gift was a used car -- a fully loaded, gold-colored Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. I was 16, and it was my first car.

But here's the thing: My younger brother borrowed my Karmann Ghia and totaled it.

Taylor borrowed Dustin's Jeep and totaled it. (Do you sense a theme here?)

Taylor still has his Fender Stratocaster, but he has other guitars that he plays more frequently.

When Vince and I returned to Miami in 1981, we were warned not to venture outside our hotel because crime was so rampant.

Gifts come and go. The best ones are probably like Madison's trip to Australia. They create great memories, and point us in a new direction.

God's gift that was the light surely points us in a new direction. God's gift that was the light should illuminate our paths.

N. T. Wright is a great theologian who writes very accessible books, with his own translations of the New Testament.

And here's how he translates verses 6-8 in John's prologue. The verses are talking about John the Baptist.

“There was a man called John, who was sent from God. He came as evidence, to give evidence about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He was not himself the light, but he came to give evidence about the light.”

That was the role of John the Baptist, surely. But is it not also our role?

“To give evidence about the light”? Isn’t that exactly what every single believer in Jesus Christ should be doing, by definition?

Giving evidence about the light? Telling in words and actions about the gift we received through this Word made flesh, this light bursting in on darkness?

The gift that can’t be crashed like my Karmann Ghia or Dustin’s Jeep. The gift that can’t be traded for a better guitar. The gift that can’t be turned into a crime zone like Miami.

John makes two statements that are equally true, equally valid, though they would seem to be contradictory.

First, **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

And second, **“The true light was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”**

We have two things going on simultaneously here, two things that we know from our own experience to be true.

Darkness did not, will not, overcome the light that is Jesus Christ.

But still, the world did not, does not, know him.

Ultimately, Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and his resurrection has assured his victory over the darkness. And yet, we know there is still evil at work in the world.

Right now we are facing a deadly disease and an ugly racism that has persevered in one form or another since Africans were kidnapped and brought to this country as slaves.

The darkness will always, always be out there. But we do not have to live in it.

Jesus has shown us a way out. **“To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God....”**

We have the choice, the power, to leave the darkness behind us.

When it's darker than we've ever seen it, our God of light gives us starlight and tiny blue phosphorescent algae.

When our lives are darker than we ever thought possible, he makes us stronger than disease, stronger than hate, stronger than the lies we are often told by our own government.

He can give us a light that the darkness cannot overcome.

But it's up to us to say yes, OK, turn it on.

Amen.