

From Darkness to Light

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the First Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 2015.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:5

This year the first Sunday after Christmas happens to fall on what would be the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist. John began his working life as a fisherman along with his brother, James and their father Zebedee. In those days you were expected to remain in a family business all your working life, but God had other plans for John. Jesus called him and the other fishermen to follow him as fishers of people. The two brothers and Peter became part of an inner circle with Jesus. As the youngest and closest of the disciples, John is referred to as the beloved disciple.

His main theme is simple but profound. We are to love one another as God loves us. God's love for us is the one absolute in a world of changing and shifting values. Love overrides any personal feelings that we may have about another. We therefore are free to love and respect everyone, especially those whom we don't like. Thomas Merton wrote that when love seeks the good of others, all else is taken care of. Love involves risks. When we give our heart to someone, we risk it not being received or returned. We take the risk of discovering our better self by seeking the best in others.

John was the only one of the apostles not to suffer a martyr's death, but lived to a very old age. He authored the fourth gospel as well as the three letters that bear his name. The eagle is John's symbol because it was said that his writing style is as lofty as an eagle.

John's gospel doesn't mention Christ's birth at Bethlehem with the familiar figures of Joseph and Mary in the stable with their newborn child in a manger surrounded by shepherds and the wise men. Instead, John simply uses the imagery of the light coming into the darkness. John testifies, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." The Greek for word is logos from which we get terms such as monologue, dialogue and catalogue. In this case logos describes the mind of God that took human form and lived among us in the life and person of Jesus. In Greek philosophy, logos was the principle that defined the world and gave it character. For us, Christ is our link with our Creator, defining our place in the Creation.

John's opens his narrative the same as the book of Genesis: "In the beginning." He goes on to describe how all things came into being with the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness. To walk in the light is to walk in the way of God. It validates that what God created is good, giving meaning to our being saved from all that is evil and wrong and untrue. Those who accepted Christ as the Logos of God were given power to be children of God who are born not of human will, but of God. It is the greatest expression of grace that God became one of us that we might become more like God.

While the law was given through Moses, grace comes through Christ. In him, we are no longer slaves to sin and fear. We live in a world where the violence of the gun culture is out of control and if we let fear take hold of us we would never feel safe, even in our own homes. We have to go on being the people God means for us to be. We aren't destined to walk in darkness. We have been ignited by the Spirit of God to be people of light. When we become absorbed in the busyness of our own worlds, we lose our focus of those around us who become mere vague images. We have to stop and refocus to see those we know and love who are an important and valuable part of our lives.

Someone once told me that she thought Christmas was a sad time. When I asked why, she said that it was because the newborn Christ child was destined to die. I had never thought of it that way and I still don't. It is true that Jesus was born to live and die for us, but I am not sad about that. He allowed himself to be put to death on the cross as the greatest example of

sacrificial love. Selfish love seeks its own; unselfish love seeks the good of others.

The emphasis in this season is to celebrate the birth of Christ with lights. Now is our time to emphasize the image of Mary nurturing her newborn child. Next spring, during the Lenten season, we will emphasize Christ's suffering and death with the image of Mary holding the slumped body of her son. Both are real and necessary images of the sacred story of our salvation because without the cross there can be no crown. The story that begins with the birth of Jesus does not end with his death. It continues with his rising above the pain inflicted on him to his triumph over the forces of evil and death. His victory makes possible our victory over all the evil and violence in the world.

Now that we have passed the winter solstice, the long dark nights is slowly giving way to days with more light. The imagery of light and darkness is so much a part of our faith. It helps us understand our worldview. Where darkness represents ignorance, fear, hatred, sin and death, the light of Christ provides understanding, trust, love, goodness and life. The image of darkness is just as necessary as the light. How else would we know the light were it not for the darkness? Some of the most important lessons we learn in life are those dark times when we fall flat on our face and get back up and move on into the greater light of learning from our mistakes.

Seeds grow in the darkness of the ground; we grew in the darkness of our mother's womb and Christ rose from the darkness of the tomb to the light of the resurrection. Out of the darkness of the world in which there is so much violence and hatred comes the light of knowing that as a people of compassion we are stronger than any force of evil in the world. As God makes the morning out of the night, my hope for you this Christmas season is that in the midst of our doubts and fears, the dark places of our lives are transformed by the brightness of the light of Christ.