

Making Room at the Manger: Celebrating What Unites Us

John 1: 1-9

To be honest, I had a completely different sermon planned for this morning. But that sermon never seemed to come together. No matter how much time I spent with it, no matter how much gnashing of teeth and throwing of wadded up paper balls, that sermon never felt right. It felt hollow. It felt shallow. It didn't do justice to where the Spirit of God was moving among us.

This became clear to me when I ran across the prophetic words of Thomas Merton in which about "fifty years ago, he warned us about what can happen when all words have become alike. Merton cautioned us that when this happens, we will no longer be able to presume that even our most sacred words will still have meaning or value, that instead our sacred words will be seen as everything else in our world, marketing tools to get people to buy into empty promises and useless hopes. Merton even commented that "these days to say 'God is love' is like saying 'Eat [Your] Wheaties.'" No one will take the promises behind these words seriously. They will simply become just another thing we Christians say or another thing we Christians do because we have forgotten their implications for our mission and ministry as the Church, because we have forgotten their life

transforming meaning for us and how we translate that knowledge to living out our faith as the people of God. Merton cautioned that once we reached this point, we will no longer have room for the creative life giving power of God to come into our lives. We will no longer allow it to bring new beginnings for God's people any more. We will be in the darkness and in the darkness we will remain.

I've thought a lot about Merton's prophetic words this week, especially as we take a look at such a familiar text. I've wondered if the very words of "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God" if these words truly have lost their power, if they have lost their meaning. I wondered if the very words spoken to us by John, words which tell us "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people, words that tell us The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it", I've wondered if these words have any value or voice any more, especially in a world which is filled to the brim with noise, filled to the brim false advertising, if these life giving, creative words of John's still have the power to pull us out of the darkness, to bring us together, to fill us with light just when we need it the most? I've wondered this week if these words still have meaning for us as people of faith or if Merton's words really have come true, if we have really reached a time when all our words

are alike, leaving no room for God's creative power to come into our world, leaving no room for transformation, leaving no room for new life once more?

Thankfully, after losing my way for a bit, I can stand before you today and say that yes, these words still have value. They still have meaning. They still have a voice. This life changing transformative words still have the power to pull us out of the darkness and I rejoice in that. These words assure us "that far better things await us; joys that we can scarcely imagine, that we don't have to await to someday a long time from now to experience this joy. This joy is here right now, if we have the strength and the courage to open our hearts to the Light shining in the darkness, welcoming us home once more.

Now before I get ahead of myself, I had better take a clue from the author of John and go back to the beginning.

In the beginning of this week, I was feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I know I'm not alone in this. Many of you have mentioned to me feeling the same way in recent months and days. We can't attribute this feeling to any one particular instance. It just simply feels as if the darkness is overwhelming all of us right now, like there is this undercurrent of uncertainty running through everything, a disturbance in the force if you will. As someone put it, "It feels like we are living in a world where we don't know the rules anymore."

Please hear I'm not even talking about what's going on in the outside world right now. I'm simply talking about right here, right in the life of Midway Christian Church. So many of us are dealing with so much right now...grief, sadness, loss, taking care of parents, watching the roles reverse as we become the care givers and the parent becomes the one in need of constant care.

The moment this became clear for me was when I asked Joni to send out an email update about people within our congregation. And she nailed it when she simply said at the beginning of her email.... "Get comfortable. We have a lot going on right now." Looking at all those names and concerns listed out one by one moved this undercurrent of uncertainty from being an abstract entity to a tangible reality for us as a collective community of faith.

In reviewing that email, it finally hit me-how in the world was I supposed to talk about rejoicing on this Third Sunday of Advent when most of us are just trying to keep our heads above water? This gave me a moment of pause and like the author of John, I took that moment to once again listen for the voice of God speaking, listen for the creative power of God moving amongst us, bridging the gap between promise and the joy it brings along the way. This voice invited me to again spend some time with the first part of John's Gospel, mainly the first five verses and experience one more the creative life changing power of God, moving across the chaos, bring new life as it goes.

I invite us to do the same. I invite us to hear these words again, close your eyes and listen, listen for where the Voice of God is speaking.... In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life,^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (Please open your eyes.)

As I read these words this week over and over again, I was reminded that John was writing to a group of people feeling the same way we are right now. John's community was facing persecution. They were ostracized from everything they had known before...families, synagogues, friends. There was an undercurrent of uncertainty running through every aspect of their lives. They were wondering how they could rejoice in the midst of the darkness.

Through the words of his prologue, John reminds his community and us again today that we worship a God who is still at work in this world. John tells us since the beginning of time, God has moved across the chaos, creating something new, bringing forth life, calling the Light to shine in the darkness. With these words, John wants us to know that our God is not in some distant universe far far way, only checking in on God's creation when it suits God's purposes. No our God

is here, our God is with us, inviting us to experience God's love and grace in a new way.

John is inviting us to witness to the light in our midst, knowing that our God moves about our world, feeling everything we feel, knowing that our God moves about our world, promising always to be by our side.

With these few simple life giving verses, John reminds us that this is no ordinary story. It is the story which tells us of the moment when God became flesh and dwelt among us, changing our relationship forever. This moment changed who we perceived our God to be. It changed how we see God at work in this world. It changed how we experience God's words to us as God's people. These are not empty words. These are promises from a God who loved us so much that God sent God's only Son so that we would know the depth and breadth of God's love for each and every one of us.

And that my friends is why we celebrate today and all days. This is why we rejoice. We know "our lives matter to God. Our welfare is of tremendous importance to our God. We know there is no worry, too small, no challenge too great that our God is not eager to share it with us."

Through his words, John reminds his community and reminds us as well that as the Body of Christ here on Earth, no matter what we are facing, we are not

alone. We are a community bound together by God's love. And together as one, "we hold the light for one another. We bear witness to the Light that holds us all. As a whole, together, united as one through God's grace, we testify to this Light that shines its infinite love and mercy on us across oceans, across borders, across time"

All Because... we know this Light is the Word of God, this light is the voice of God still speaking, all because we know that this light is the creative powerful force of God becoming flesh, living among us, in amazing life giving ways.

Or let me say it this way....I came across a painting done by a fellow pastor shortly after she lost her husband. She talked about how dark those days and weeks were after experiencing such pain and grief. And in her painting, she intentionally blended the light in among the dark, using golds, whites, grays, and blacks. She shared how when she was painting this picture, a verse from a poem kept running through her mind, a verse that told her, that "all that is gold does not glitter. She kept wondering where she had heard this verse. It was familiar but she just couldn't place it... that is until she came across a poem by J.R.R. Tolkien...which says... "All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost, The old that is strong does not wither, deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the

ashes, a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king.”

A light from the Shadows shall spring...sounds a lot like what John is telling us.... God’s breath fills all things with a living, breathing light— ⁵A light that thrives in the depths of darkness, *blazes through murky bottoms*. It cannot and will not be quenched.

So today and all days, let us rejoice, making room at the manger for God’s light to shine in the darkness. Amen.