

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, December 13, 2020

WITNESS TO THE LIGHT

John 1:6-8, 19-28

On July 23, 2002, nine miners in Western Pennsylvania became trapped in a flooded mine. The injured and desperate men tied themselves together so stronger ones could sustain weaker ones as they waited to be rescued. Journalists from across the nation reported the rescue effort, which took five long days. No one could believe it, when all nine miners emerged safely from the mine.

On July 30, people gathered for a worship service to thank God for saving the miners' lives. At the ceremony, there were ten miners' lamps set up on the altar, even though there were only nine miners. According to the pastor who presided over the worship celebration, the tenth lamp represented God's presence, which the miners claimed they could feel as they waited to be rescued. It was this "10th Man" they honored, as they read Psalm 103: "Praise the Lord...Who redeems your life from the pit." Welcome to this celebration of our "tenth man"—the One who has rescued us from the pit.

We are seeking to get to the heart of Christmas. We began on the first Sunday of Advent with the awesomeness of God. The God who created all the galaxies, and billions and billions of stars that fill our sky. What an amazing truth! Then last week we added God's righteousness. God is "Holy, holy, holy." That is why God reached out to redeem us from our unrighteousness—to take our sin-stained hearts, and give us a heart of love, compassion, and forgiveness in return.

Today we focus on another central reason for Advent—God's revelation. God revealed both God's character, and dream for humanity in the man, Jesus Christ. If we only picture Jesus as a tiny Babe in Bethlehem, we will never get to the heart of Christmas. Christmas can be understood as part of the total Christ event—Jesus' birth, life, teachings, death upon the cross, resurrection from the dead, continuing presence through the power of the Holy spirit, and His final reign at the end of time.

Sounds theological, doesn't it? Who wants to think of theology at Christmas? It's a shame the church keeps trying to horn in on Christmas, isn't it? It's a shame we keep trying to make Christmas into some kind of a religious holiday. Can't we be satisfied with Jingle bells, and Frosty the Snowman? Personally, I like Jingle Bells and Frosty the Snowman. But they have more to say about winter than they do Christmas. And even then, they apply only to parts of our world that have snow. Can you imagine a child in Miami, for example, singing "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas"? Well, there might be some white sand nearby.

Let's get real! Jesus IS the reason for the season. Take the Babe from the manger—and all that Babe represents—then we might as well shut the doors and go home. That's true not only of the church, it's also true of humanity's long-term future. In the prologue to his Gospel, John writes, "There came a man sent from God; his name was John. He came as witness to testify concerning that light, so through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as witness in the light." The light John witnessed to, of course, was Christ. The most important thing about Christmas is that Christ came into the world.

Christ's coming shows that God cares about people. It's wonderful to contemplate the heavens and ponder the grandeur of God. It's more than the mind can take in. The heavens tell the glory of God. Very few people seriously doubt that God exists. But God is not only grand, God is also holy as we noted last week. Study God's creation, and you will conclude very quickly that God is a God of lawfulness. No problem there. The question is, does this almighty and all-righteous God care about us? Do our problems and concerns matter to the divine Creator? And the answer of Advent and Christmas is, yes, God cares more than we can possibly imagine.

Christmas says that it is all about us. God's love for us. God's willingness even to die for us. The God of all creation, the righteous God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this God who created all that is with a simple word, loved us so much that He died on the cross of Golgotha, like a common thief...and it was all about us. This is the reason for the season. The coming of Christ into the world. "There came a man sent from God, his name was John. He came as witness to testify concerning that light, so through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." Light has come into our world in Jesus of Nazareth. The tenth man has come down into the pit of our darkness, to deliver us from hopelessness and despair. What is the proper response to the coming of that light? **First of all, it is to open ourselves, and receive the light.**

Pastor Earl Palmer of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley tells about Rembrandt's painting called *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. This is Rembrandt's interpretation of the visit of the shepherds to the Babe in Bethlehem. It is a simple scene in a stable. In the foreground are mother and child, with Joseph in the shadows in the background. Peering into the manger where the Babe is lying are shepherds, with their sheep scattered around them. They could not leave the sheep in the field. They had to bring them along. Arching above the manger, the artist has painted a ladder which suggests in the shadows it casts, the form of a cross. Rembrandt was too great a painter just to put a cross in, with no justification in terms of the picture itself, but the ladder subtly suggests it. And on the beam against which the ladder rests, is a rooster, the symbol of betrayal. The artist is suggesting that by betrayal, and crucifixion, the Holy One in the manger would become the world's Deliverer, and Redeemer.

“But the striking thing about the picture is light illuminating the whole scene is not coming from outside, but from the manger where the Babe is lying. There is no halo over the Babe, such as medieval painters often employed, but light is streaming from the manger. Their faces are put into sharp relief as they look down, and you can see light is coming from the Babe himself. That is Rembrandt’s very remarkable way of saying the story of Christmas is the light in darkness.”

The light of Christ has come into our world. To eliminate darkness. You and I have dark places in our hearts. Dark places that only Christ can illuminate. We need to open ourselves to love represented by the Babe of Bethlehem. **And secondly, we need to bear witness to the light we have found in Christ.** So that everyone in this world may walk in the light, and there will be no darkness at all.

Some of you may be familiar with a story about Dr. Oswald Golter. Dr. Golter was a missionary to China more than 80 years ago. After World War II, he was asked to leave that country. So, his missionary society wired him a ticket and Dr. Golter made his way to India to catch a ship home to America. While he was there, he noticed there were many Jews living in the area—in attics and sheds and barns. They were there because India was one of the few countries that welcomed Jews following the War. And Dr. Golter was excited to see them, and went around and greeted them. It was Christmastime, and he said to them “Merry Christmas to you!” And they said “We’re Jews.” “Well, I know,” said Dr. Golter, “but Merry Christmas anyway.” “I tell you,” they responded, “we’re Jews. We don’t mark Christmas.” “I know” he said, “but if you did, what would you want for Christmas?” “Well, if we did,” they replied, “then we probably would want some fine German pastries.” So, Dr. Golter found a shop that sold fine German pastries, cashed in his ticket home, and bought up boxes and boxes of pastry. He took it back to the barns and attics and sheds, and handed it out to Jews saying, “Merry Christmas to you. Merry Christmas.”

That story was told in the presence of Dr. Golter years later at a seminary where he was invited to speak. As he got up to the microphone, a young seminarian stood up, and said to Dr. Golter, “I can’t believe you did that. Those people aren’t Christians. They don’t even believe in Jesus Christ!” Dr. Golter nodded his head and said, “I know.” Then he added, “But I do, I do.”

AMEN!!!