

Light in the Darkness

John 1: 5 & 9

A lighthouse is a tall tower building usually located next to a dangerous coastline or at the entrance to a harbor. There are some *wave-washed* lighthouses that actually sit in the water! Improvements in technology over the years have made lighthouses less necessary and, in some cases, obsolete.

The most important equipment in a lighthouse is the lamp. Originally, it was just a fire. Later, a lens-focused lamp provided better quality light. These were oil fueled and, later, electricity. Their purpose of the lighthouse in general, and the lamp specifically, was to warn ships of the treacherous coastline.

Lighthouse keepers were unsung heroes in world history. Their work was very difficult, especially that of maintaining the lamp and keeping the windows clean. Their lives were also difficult. The isolated settings of most lighthouses and the loneliness of their keepers have made great settings for horror stories – and many have been written. As dangerous and boring as life was in a lighthouse, it got very intense when a storm hit and hundreds of lives were at stake.

A lighthouse is a symbol for guidance, direction, and help for those in need. Lighthouse International is the name of a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving vision and to rehabilitation services. They help people overcome vision loss. Lighthouse is a good image for us as we continue the journey of Advent. It is that symbol of light shining in the darkness used in of Jesus in John's Gospel. Jesus was light *coming into the world*.

The Advent themes of love, peace, hope, and joy are not hard for most of us to embrace on the way to Christmas. Yet, this is not a season of joy for many. Christmas is often a season of melancholy and sadness – a season of darkness.

The twenty-fifth of December was probably not Jesus' actual birthday – at least no more than a one in three hundred sixty-five chance! There are a variety of traditions as to why this date was chosen. In northern cultures, December 25th was the date connected to the winter solstice, the shortest amount of daylight all year (in the northern hemisphere). These ancient cultures marked the encroaching darkness and then the turnaround of increased light with a festival to celebrate the returning and conquering sun.

By the fourth century, Christianity had assigned December 25th as the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This image of *light coming into the world* was a natural fit. The powers of darkness flee the coming of the light and it is cause for joy.

We still live in a world dominated by the powers of darkness. Overcoming them is never easy, even with the presence of the *light of the world*. After all, it was difficult for Jesus to overcome the darkness. It was difficult for those early Christians and for people throughout history. It is so very difficult for all people of faith today to overcome the darkness around and the darkness within. It is especially difficult for those who

challenge people's thinking and their priorities – for those who confront the status quo and those who benefit from the existing power structures.

Let us pause on our Advent journey, before we reach Bethlehem, to consider the journey we are making. This journey is more than you may think. It certainly is more than our cultural celebration reveals. It may be that the reality of depression at this time of year is a sign of what we're failing to see and recognize.

Advent is an intentional journey of moving into the darkness while watching the light growing slowly – trusting that it will eventually overcome that darkness. Last year, I was visiting friends in Florida. One morning, I got up early and walked to the beach to watch the sunrise. It seemed to take forever in the early morning chill. The sky grew gradually red, slowly brightening until suddenly the red ball, the orb of the sun, appeared. Upon rising, all at once it seemed to leap up above the horizon. Daylight flooded in on me. This is the way of light in the darkness. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Isaiah 9: 2a)

What will we find at the manger? What difference does the journey to Bethlehem make to our lives all year? What happens to people when they start responding to the light they see? What directions do people's journeys take when they follow that light and choose to live according to their own vision? To tell the truth, it's hard to know what will happen. I wound up in Kansas City as pastor of Crossroads Church!

There are two journeys in our lives, each with a cost. One is the cost of the journey toward discovering your personal calling. This cost includes hard work, spiritual discipline, and openness to seeing yourself more honestly. The journey of discovery requires a willingness *to put everything on the table*. Second, there is the cost of actually living out that calling.

The journey you are practicing during Advent is really the life journey of becoming yourself and of using your unique gifts fully – what bring you to life. We talk about being on a journey here at Crossroads, a journey as a congregation and also supporting each of us on our own life journey. What sort of journey are we taking? Paradoxically, the journey of discovering living as yourself is a journey of self-denial – of saying “No” to many things so that you can say “Yes” to one. Say “no” to all that is not truly you, to all you have chosen without choosing and value without evaluating. Say “yes” to your true self a self who is at peace. Say “yes” to loving and being loved. After all, “you can be yourself only if you are no one else.” Say “No” to their approval. Say “yes” to your own evaluation of your success and failure -- your values. (taken from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *Death: the Final Stage of Growth*)

There is a certain recklessness at Christmas. God is being reckless in the world in Jesus. Christmas calls you to be a little reckless, too by believing and stepping out in your own calling -- reckless by choosing who you are, who you will become, and what you will do. The warning that awaits at the manger is this: “The cross describes the kind of thing that

can happen to you if you respond to God's personal calling for you." (Francis Dewar, *Invitations*)

There is a cost to following Jesus and daring to walk free. In Florence, Italy – the Academia Museum – stands the statue of *David* by Michelangelo Buonoforte. The hallway leading *David* is lined with a series of unfinished statues – Michelangelo's carvings of men and women in the process of coming to *life*. You and I are striving to become, to live, and to realize our potential. That's why we are here in this life. That's why I am here at Crossroads -- perhaps you, too? It is to strive, to become, and to live.

What is in you wanting to walk free? Is it worth the journey of Advent, and beyond to Calvary, and beyond to the crossroads of your life, especially in times of crisis, care, and challenge today? Is it worth it to be on that kind of journey? That depends on what you want in life. That depends on whether you want to experience deep love, peace, hope, and joy. This journey is the only way. If you want riches beyond what gold and silver represent, then this journey is the only way. It is like this proverb:

*Deep in the sea are riches beyond compare,
But if you seek safety, it is on the shore.* (Saadi of Shiraz)

To be on this journey is to live trusting that "light shines in the darkness and the darkness [can] not overcome it; [that] "the true light, [that] enlightens everyone [is in] the world." John 1: 5, 9. This light is dawning in you, waiting to be born in you, waiting to shine in you, and waiting to shine through you.