

15 December 2024

Witness to the Light

John 1:1-19

We read from the Prologue to John's Gospel, John 1:1-19.

1 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 4 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, 13 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. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'

There are several reasons for me to keep this morning's sermon short. First, obviously, it is Music Sunday here, and we have a lot of extra music to do in the same amount of time. Second, our scripture reading was longer than usual. Third, I've already used one of my primary sermon illustrations in the children's message (the one about the mirror), and finally, because some people don't believe I can do it. We'll see about that. But I did want to say just a few words.

This Advent we've been looking at the miracle of Christ through the metaphor of light. First, in the Old Testament, we looked at Isaiah 9's description of the Promised Son as a light in the darkness. Then we looked at Isaiah 42's declaration that God intended his light to be a "light to the nations." Today we come to the New Testament, and in the long theological poem that begins the Gospel of John, we again find the metaphor of light. Actually, we find a string of metaphors: Christ is the Word, and the Word is life, and that life is light. The poet clearly knows where the light imagery comes from, because he restates the very same metaphors from Isaiah that we've been looking at. Verses 4 and 5: *in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

But at that point the prologue abruptly shifts attention from the transcendent word and life and light of God to a human being named John the Baptist. *There was a man sent from God,*

whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. Then, just as abruptly, the poem goes back to talking about the Light itself, how it came to the world, but the world refused to see it. How *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

And then, once again, we jump back to John. *John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."* Then we drop John a second time and go back to a passage describing the work of the Christ, how God the Only Son, reveals God to humanity, and then finally ... that's right ... we go back to John. The effect of all this back and forth is that in this gospel's prologue we have a brilliant, glorious story of a miracle. The light of God has come to earth in Christ to reveal God to humanity. But that miracle story is interwoven with another story, the very much not miraculous human being John the Baptist, who first bore witness to the light.

I think this is more than just a literary device. By switching back and forth like that, the gospel deftly sketches the Christian condition. We followers of Christ in the world have a Word to proclaim to the nations, a light to shine in the darkness. But we, like John, are not ourselves that light. Far from it. There is nothing especially shiny about us. We are the clumsy lampstand the light sits on, or at the very best, we are a reflection of the light that we have glimpsed. We are like mirrors. Put us in a drawer, and we are part of the darkness. But hold us up to light, and we make that light brighter. Our task is John's task: to bear witness to the word we have heard, to reflect the light that has shined on us.

Now, I'm not going to take time today to talk about all the ways we can reflect the light of Christ, because if I did that, some doubting people would be right. So I'll come back to that question in my sermons in January. For today, it's enough to just mention one way that we reflect God's light: joy. If we are the bearers of good news, indeed of *the Good News*, then let us be joyful. And let us sing.