

Advent 3B 2020 Sermon

John 1:1-8, 19-28

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 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.

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.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Recently, I've asked several people, "What are your plans for Christmas?" And almost to a person, they have said, "I don't have any plans. I don't know **what** I'll be doing."

This Advent has been a *season* of uncertainty within a *year* of uncertainty within a *culture* of uncertainty. Back in February, when the coronavirus was just coming to our attention, we didn't know much about it, heard conflicting information about how serious it was, had no clue how long it was going to last, how many lives it was going to take, how many jobs it was going to cost, how it would turn our world upside down and leave so much of our future up in the air.

The summer brought its *own* uncertainties, with racial tensions and record-setting fires and hurricanes. The recent Presidential election, also, has been fraught with uncertainty: election results hanging in the air for days, and then weeks, as ballots were recounted. Even now, some are **still** questioning the validity of the election. For years now, we have heard about "fake news," "alternative facts," conspiracy theories. Misinformation is perpetuated on social media, and photos and videos have been doctored and disseminated. Even **science** has been called into question; and it is uncertain how many people will *trust* the vaccines which are now being shipped around the world, with the hopes of putting an end to this pandemic.

Uncertainty upon uncertainty. In the words of a hymn we sang last week, “The verities we knew seem shaken and untrue.”

This past week, *I* experienced some symptoms which I thought might be symptoms of COVID-19. I got tested, and then waited “in the dark” for the results. I got a taste of that “not knowing” which millions of people have experienced this past year while waiting for test results or praying for loved ones who contracted the disease. (My results came back negative, thanks be to God!)

While I was waiting in the dark for the results of my test, I attended the online Advent Retreat which I had suggested in the Belltower; and I resonated with a poem shared during that retreat, which begins: “I wait for light, praying in darkness for all I cannot know, mend or understand...”¹ The hymn we just sang expresses a similar prayer: “Longing for light, we wait in darkness, longing for truth, we turn to you.”²

Isn't that the way many of us feel? We wait in the darkness, longing for light in the midst of this dark season of pandemic, isolation, separation, sickness, and death. We are tired of the distancing, the restrictions on our movements, not being able to attend church in person, not being able to share the holidays with friends and loved ones. We grieve those who have died, worry about and pray for those who are ill. We become depressed, angry, frustrated, discouraged. It wears us down. Longing for light, we wait in darkness.

But now, a vaccine has been approved! Is **this** the light that we have been longing for?

In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist is sent from God to be a witness, to testify to the light. The light to which John testifies is not a new political leader; not a conquering Messiah who comes to overthrow the occupying Roman Empire; not a miracle cure for a pandemic. The light to which John testifies is not a full-sun, high-noon, “conquering” light; it is something more subtle, unseen by many. It shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not overcome it. Or, in the NIV translation, “the darkness has not understood it.”

The darkness has not understood, nor has it overcome, the light.

But what **is** this light? What does this metaphor which our Gospel uses so often represent? John Shea says that our Gospel uses the word “light” to symbolize “a full awareness of what is real, an illumination of the ultimate structures of human existence, a consciousness of God, self, neighbor, and creation.”² A full awareness of what is real, amidst our shaky uncertainties; an illumination of the ultimate structures of human existence, amidst the fallible or self-serving structures we create; a consciousness of God, self, neighbor, and creation when we are so often unaware or not present to any of them. We might say that “light,”

as John's Gospel understands it, symbolizes a conscious awareness of, and connection with, all that is most deeply *True* and *Real* and *of God*, as opposed to all the false, pretentious, fictitious realities our egos and our surface lives fabricate: fictitious realities which, nonetheless, we tend to believe are the *only* realities there are.

The Good News is that the Real, the True, and that which is *of God* is **in** this world of fake news and science deniers and alternative facts and conspiracy theories and distrust run rampant. **In** this world of egos and self-created realities. The light which is the life of all people shines in the darkness; and the darkness does not understand that light. The powers-that-be in both Temple and Empire in Jesus' day did not *understand* the light, and so they, in their own darkness, put Jesus to death. But if the cross and tomb represent the darkness of our world at its worst, the Resurrection is proof that that darkness cannot overcome the light.

When I quoted from that poem earlier, I left out some words at the end of the sentence – words that describe the hope and promise of the light which shines in the darkness. The full sentence reads, “I wait for light, praying in darkness for all I cannot know, mend or understand, *held in this dark love.*”¹

Held in this dark love. There it is! The light that shines in the darkness! We are held in this love of which we are so often unconscious, oblivious, and unaware. But this Advent and Christmas season remind us, assure us, *promise* us that the fact that we are **unaware** of this dark love does not mean it doesn't exist – far from it! God is the **most** Real, the **most** True, the most **Certain** presence there is in this universe. And *God*, St. John tells us, **is** Love (1 John 4:8), while St. Paul assures us that “nothing can ever *separate* us from this love.” (Romans 8:38, NLT2) It is *always* present, *always* there, though we may be unconscious of it, though it may seem a “dark love.” We are nonetheless held by it. We are held by it.

Yes, we live in a season of uncertainty within a year of uncertainty within a culture of uncertainty. But Advent calls us to become aware of, conscious of, the Deepest and Truest of certainties and Realities: Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Week after week, the growing light of our Advent Wreath symbolizes the growing illumination and awareness of that dark love which has been holding us all along.

And so we can pray, with our hymn, knowing that our prayer is answered: “Christ, be our Light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness. Christ be our Light,” that we ourselves might be “light for the world to see.”²

AMEN

1 “While It Is Still Dark,” by Kathleen Henderson Staudt

2 “Christ, Be Our Light,” by Bernadette Farrell

3 John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, p. 29