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3 Advent B: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

St. Anne's Episcopal Parish, Annapolis

December 11, 2011

Light into Darkness

This was a dialogue sermon, with two voices alternating parts.

Voice One:

During Advent, days become darker. Here in the northern hemisphere, nights literally get longer, light lessens, darkness descends. It's as if the creation itself accompanies us as we look for light to shine and dispel gloom and sadness. It is in these darkening days that a voice calls out to tell us of hope, of light shining in the darkness, a light no darkness can overcome.

In today's gospel we hear about a man who comes to bear witness to the light: John the Baptist, who was not the light, but came to testify to the light. John was sent by God to tell people who walk in darkness that God has not forgotten them. God sent John to tell people Jesus is the light of the world. The light of Christ is more powerful than darkness – than any darkness we might experience.

God still sends John the Baptist to us on this Third Sunday of Advent, because darkness still descends, and we still need reminding that Jesus is the true light and Jesus the light of the world still shines into our darkness.

Voice Two:

I used to be a rather happy person. I laughed a lot and had a lot of friends. I enjoyed school, worked hard, got a good job. But lately it feels like I've lost my zest for life. I used to have goals I wanted to achieve: things I wanted to do, places I wanted to visit, people I wanted to see. But now, I'm not too sure what I want. It all seems rather pointless. It's not so much that work is a grind, as it is rather hum drum. It's not so much that people are mean, as it is that they are rather irritating.

It's not that I wouldn't like to take a course in photography or painting, as it is I'm just too tired to do anything about it. Not that I'm really doing all that much. I flip on the television. There is nothing on. I still sit and watch for hours. Night falls and the darkness overcomes me.

I wished I cared more, but I just don't. Sometimes it feels as though all my family wants from me is the credit card or the keys to the car. How was your day? Fine. Anything new? No. See you later? Don't wait up. I'm not even sure people in my neighborhood know my name. I wave and smile when I pick up the mail or put out the trash, but it all feels rather phony. I go back inside and see if I got any messages. My sense of time seems all out of whack. Is it really December already? Wasn't it just August? How can the minutes pass so slowly and the months pass so quickly? I can't remember the last time I heard from an old friend, or talked to my aging aunts, or wrote a personal letter, or sat in the large easy chair I bought and read a good book. I can't believe it is getting dark so early these days. Better get ready for bed. Brush my teeth, set up the coffee for the morning, turn on the alarm, turn in for the night and get ready for another day. I turn out the lights, pull up the covers, and pray in the darkness that I will be able to sleep tonight.

Voice One:

Into darkness, light shines, even into the darkness of meaninglessness.

Jesus is the light of the world. His light shines on our path to bring courage and hope, direction, and purpose. In the words of scripture, we can hear Jesus say to us: Because God created you, because God loves you, every life has purpose. Every life has meaning. Every one matters. Including you. I am the Way, says Jesus. I will show you the joy of a life lived in service of others. I will show you the adventure of using your life to make a difference – even for those who may not notice or care, even for those who may not acknowledge or thank you. I know what that is like. I know.

Ask me what I want from you. Look at what I have given you to use for me – what I have equipped you with, empowered you for. Trust me. Rely on me for the courage to reach out beyond yourself. To reject the powers of darkness who tempt you to say, who cares? Why bother? Let my light shine on your path. Take my hand and let me walk beside you and watch as the darkness recedes.

I may not call you to something large or something the world will notice. I may call you to be faithful in small and steadfast ways. Trust that I am the Way. My light will dispel darkness and illumine your purpose and path.

Voice Two:

I saw the big letter D, written in red ink at the top of the page and I burst into tears. Admittedly I was only seven years old. But I was in love with my teacher and I wanted her to love me. When I did well and she praised me, I felt wonderful. I don't know why I did so poorly on the test, and, to tell the truth, I didn't really care whether I knew the answers or not. But I did care what Mrs. Johnson thought of me and now she must think me a very foolish little boy. Being clever was my way of saying I want you to love me. And what did I do? I earned a big fat D. I felt not only foolish, but rejected. It created a dark and hurt place in my little heart.

That wound and darkness has stayed with me. I grew up of course but all along I've desperately wanted people to love me. The popular kids when I was a teenager, the girl with curly hair and freckles in high-school, my English professor in college, my mentor at work. If I did well, I'd get a pat on the back or a hug, and it felt like I earned an A+. I basked in the light of praise. But if I didn't, there was that big fat D ... written in red ink ... circled ... underlined ... twice. And I shrunk in the darkness of rejection. Why do I say such stupid things and tell such stupid jokes? I haven't read the right books, I don't know a thing about wine, I don't live in the right neighborhood, and my golf game is rotten. I have found it easier to no longer to risk the shame of rejection. I just keep to myself. And who knows maybe someday someone will ask me what I think, and I'll be clever and funny. Because I really do care what people think of me. I really do want them to love me. Like Mrs. Johnson, my second grade teacher. Who gave me a D and broke my heart.

Voice One:

Into darkness, light shines, even into the darkness of rejection.

Jesus, Light of the world, says to us, I am the Truth. And the truth is, you are loved with a perfect love, an unconditional love that you do not have to earn, merit, or deserve; a love that you cannot earn, or merit, or deserve. This perfect love is just a gift to you. It is a love you cannot lose.

People will disappoint you. You will disappoint people. If you are honest, you will disappoint yourself. People may reject you and it may hurt you deeply, especially if you long for their love. I know. I know. I am the Truth and the truth is you are loved more than you can ask or imagine.

Why do you let past hurts be the lens through which you see yourself? Why do you let an experience of rejection distort your vision? Why do you allow your past failure to be your only guide?

It is good to desire love. God is love. When you seek approval, what your heart of hearts is really seeking is the approval and love of God. And here is the truth: you already have it. You already have the love of God, the love that made all that is and ever shall be, the love that sent me into the world to show you perfect love. Live from that love—God’s love—which already holds you close—live from that love so you can accept love, give love, show love, risk all for love. Trust my truth: Perfect love casts out fear. My light shines and even the darkness of rejection will not overcome it.

Voice Two:

When I got the news that he died, it felt like someone had kicked me in the gut. Massive heart attack, dead by the time the ambulance arrived, 44 years old, two young kids, my favorite uncle. Wham, right in the stomach, knocking the breath out of me. I really couldn’t breath for a while, gasping for breath between sobs. But even after my breathing returned to normal, it still felt like I couldn’t catch my breath. People’s voices seemed muffled and far away. My vision seemed to tunnel, focusing only on something in the distance, all the rest fuzzing and graying around the edges. The darkness of grief closed in.

I was in a strange city far from the rest of my family. I wandered streets and alleyways oblivious to my surroundings. I returned to my dorm room and tried to find a book I was supposed to read. In a single, small room, I could not find where I put the stupid book. I began to cry because I couldn’t find my book. I tried to read another book. I read the same sentence 20 times. I couldn’t remember what I just read, so I read it again. I crawled into bed and slept. I woke up startled. At first I didn’t know where I was. When I recognized my room, I sat up. I had no idea what time it was, whether it was day or night. I sat on my bed, alone and in the dark.

Voice One:

Into darkness, light shines, even into the darkness of grief.

Jesus, Light of the world, says, I am the Life. God does not leave you alone in your grief. God does not abandon you in your sadness. God sent me into the world to bring Life. I did not stand aloof from sadness. I did not hover above sorrow. I wept at the death of my friend. I weep with you and for you in your pain and loss. But I know your tears will not be the end of the story. I know that death does not have the last word. I went through death and God raised me to life again. Death cannot extinguish the light of life and I have a prepared for you a dwelling place eternal in the heavens. Let your grief be a reminder that you have loved, that

love abides. Let the brokenness you feel when you lose someone dear be a reminder that there is something more, a wholeness beyond this world, where you will be reunited with those you love but see no longer. Trust that I am the Life. My light shines, and even the darkness of grief will not overcome it.

Jesus: Light of the world, Way, Truth, Life, come, shine in our lives. Shine in our world. Dispel the darkness.

Amen.