

Our Gospel lesson for this third Sunday in Advent turns from Mark to John's Gospel. This Gospel opens with a cosmic proclamation – *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.*

Beautiful poetry with implications for the content of creation itself, a grand vision of how the world has been set up by and through God, with a promise that the darkness will never prevail. And then an abrupt turn from the cosmic to the very particular as we're introduced to 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.* John's Gospel takes us from the cosmic image of the way in which the world was formed to a particular man at a particular time in history, grounded in this world and in this flesh.

In the Gospel of John, unlike all of the other Gospels, John the baptizer does not actually baptize Jesus, rather he comes as a witness and John is eager to proclaim who he is not. As he explains to the Pharisees - he is not the Messiah, he is not the light of the world. All of his words and actions point to Jesus, who IS the Word made flesh, who IS the one who came to dwell among us, who is the Light that shines in the darkness and who is the light that the Darkness has not overcome. John the Witness comes to testify to the light, to the light which is the Word made flesh.

There are times when it does feel dark, and hopeless. It seems that the light has been extinguished. When we lose someone we love, the grief can be too much to bear. When we feel lost spiritually, and can't seem to make a connection to the Divine, we feel the darkness overwhelming us. When we are ill and there is no cure, we can feel overwhelmed by the physical challenges. When we look at the world, and see war and cruelty between people, we can wonder where to find goodness and kindness. When we look at our own nation and the divisions, we can wonder if it will all ever be ok. But we are Christians. One of the greatest gifts God gives us is hope. We have been given a role to play in overcoming the darkness and I think our role is like John's. As he explains to the Pharisees, he is not the Messiah but he is one who has come to point to the light that the darkness shall not overcome.

What does it mean to point to the light? John defines himself in, through and by his relationship with Jesus. Jesus is the great "I am," and John is clear to say, "I am not he." He is not the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet. He is not the light itself that shines in the darkness, yet who he is and why he is here is defined and inseparable from the presence of the very Word made flesh in his midst. His identity is inseparable from Jesus. We are like John the Baptist and we, too, are witnesses who are called to point to the light that the darkness shall not overcome.

John the baptizer or in the Gospel of John, John the Witness, comes to us on the third Sunday of Advent to remind us that the first and fundamental purpose of the incarnation of God is to remind us that the darkness will not, cannot, overcome the light.

Because we live with so much light around us, and light is accessible with the flip of a switch, we forget what darkness really is. In the mountains, we can get a little sense of it when we go out at night, but still, there's always some ambient light of some sort.

In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, Bruce David Forbes provides a helpful reminder of the importance of light for early celebrations of Jesus' birth. In the dead of winter, in the midst of the darkest and shortest days of the year, festivals of light were essential. John's first declaration of the incarnation, that the light of the world is continually shining when darkness should prevail, speaks to a fundamental human need for light. The Word made flesh is a promise that in the midst of all of the darkness of humanity, light can and will shine.

We know what it is to be without power momentarily, or even for a few days. We have had a glimpse of the kind of darkness that people used to live with. But we don't know in our daily lives what true physical darkness really is.

Years ago, our girl scout troop took the girls spelunking. At one point, deep in the cave, we turned off all of the flashlights to see how dark it could be. We didn't last very long, because some of the girls were frightened by how completely dark it was. Our eyes need at least a tiny bit of light, just a speck, to adjust to the darkness. Without that speck, our eyes will never adjust. We could be down in that cave five minutes, five hours, five years and still never see our hands in front of our faces. The smallest amount of light, though, will eventually allow our eyes to adjust and give us the ability to see.

We will soon celebrate the coming of the light into the bleakness of the world. In this last week and a half of anticipation, let's welcome the Word made flesh by praying about how we can point to the light of God's presence in the disturbing human brokenness all around us. When we can't see the light ourselves, others can point to it for us. When we can notice the light ourselves the darkness is subdued and we won't fall victim to it.

We are not the Messiah. We are not Jesus. John the Witness reminds us of who are, the ones who point to even the tiniest light by saying "Look, behold, the Lamb of God!"

The season of Advent is typically described as one of preparation. Could the preparation we need be to simply adjust our eyes to see light when there seems to be none. And when we see that light, to be witnesses like John who point to Jesus and say "Look!" so that all might know God's pastures of peace. Could our pointing to the light bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the imprisoned? Because regardless of what is going on in our own lives, or in the lives of the world around us, peace is possible. We are not the light, but we can recognize the light and listen for the voice of Jesus and rejoice that the darkness will not have the last word.

Amen.