

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

by

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

December 11, 2011

(Third Sunday of Advent)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁸For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil. ²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

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

²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”

²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²²Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?”

²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Albert Einstein, of all people, once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One as though nothing is a miracle. The other as though everything is a miracle.”

Maybe that frames the options about as well as anything. You either live with a kind of cynical fatalism or you live with a sense of hopeful anticipation. To live as a hopeful person is not to be naïve about life or the world we live in. It is not just to pretend that the darkness does not exist. Rather, it is to believe that in every darkness there is a light.

Advent, in our tradition, really is a season of darkness if you think about it. It comes at the darkest time of the year, the shortest days and the longest nights. Who among us has not said recently, “It sure does get dark early these days”? And that statement is a mixture of the literal and the symbolic.

But we believe that in this dark world, a light has come. It is the reason we begin our services in Advent the way that we do. As you enter for worship, you come into a dark sanctuary, but a candle is lighted and a word of witness is spoken, longing words are sung and the sanctuary, the world if you will, is suddenly filled with light. It is a dramatic representation that the light has come into the world.

All of our scriptures today have their own unique witness that the light has come into the world. Isaiah the prophet says that it is time for good news for the oppressed and the brokenhearted. What a good word.

Charles Allen, long time pastor of First United Methodist Church in Houston used to say, “Always remember that every time you preach, someone has a broken heart.” Isaiah today says that it is time for good news for the oppressed and to bind up the broken hearted. He speaks of a time of renewal and restoration. His immediate context is the people of Israel living in exile following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. But what is so powerful about these great Biblical themes is how universal the application is. We all know what it is like to live in some sort of exile from time to time and to have had some hope destroyed. The prophet says it is time to build up the ancient ruins, to raise up the former devastations, and to repair the ruined cities.

Surely one of the most tension-filled cities in our world today is Cairo, Egypt. Hosni Mubarak, the long-time dictator, has been ousted, but the way forward is not yet clear and there is still violence and anxiety in the city. Most of Egypt is of course Muslim, but there is a small but vibrant Christian community there.

One of the Christian groups lives in what is called Garbage Village. It is the poorest and worst part of Cairo. A thousand years ago, their ancestors came from the countryside to the city in search of a better living. It is a scenario played out among many peoples in many settings across our globe. Unfortunately for these

peasant people, the only way they could find to make a living was as garbage collectors. They lived off the food scraps and what meager items they could find to use, sell, or recycle. Most of the people of Garbage Village were nominal Christians, but after so long in such conditions they had just about forgotten their faith.

Then in 1974, a young resident of Garbage Village asked a Christian businessman whose trash he collected to explain the gospel to him. They had forgotten. The business man began to teach the Bible and explain the faith to any of the garbage people who would gather in one of their huts. To the people at the bottom of the social scale, it felt like the time had come when Isaiah's words were very real. There was good news for the oppressed and liberty for the captives. There is a God who loves them. Their whole attitude about themselves and about life began to change.

Within a few years, there were thousands of sincere believers in the village, so the Coptic Orthodox church built a church in the middle of Garbage Village. As they looked for the right priest to go there, no one seemed the right one to send. So, the village people asked the Christian businessman who had first taught them the Gospel if he would be their priest. He was not a priest, but he agreed to become one if the Coptic Church would ordain him. They agreed, and he was ordained as Father Samaan, and he became their priest. Father Samaan says, "When Jesus comes to a place, it changes the whole society."

A light can shine in the darkest of places. These people who have lived in darkness have seen a great light. When you hear the news stories on TV about Cairo, remember there are some Christians there in Garbage Village who live with hope.

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians has yet another way of reminding us of the light in the darkness. He encourages them and us to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances." How difficult or even foolish that seems to be at first glance. How can you rejoice always or pray without ceasing or give thanks in all circumstances? But I think he is talking about attitude. Either everything is a miracle or nothing is.

Again, this is not about being naïve or failing to take seriously anyone's darkness. But it is to affirm that finally in all circumstances, life is a gift and God is good. In the worst of circumstances, you either get better or bitter. Hope is a powerful force in the human experience.

Bernie Siegal is an internationally acclaimed cancer doctor. You may be familiar with his book, *Love, Medicine and Miracles*. Dr. Siegal noticed in his practice that people needed more than medicine and science to face and overcome cancer. People need love and hope in the darkest of times. For our thoughts today, it is love and hope that provide a light in the darkness of cancer.

Dr. Siegal tells in his book about an experiment done by a group of psychologists. Now it involves experiments on rats. I don't know why scientists do all of those experiments on rats except maybe they behave a lot like we do in certain circumstances. This particular group of rats was divided into three groups and subjected to mild electric shock to produce stress. The stress was administered so that one group could not evade the shocks, while one group was warned by a signal so that they could learn to jump over a barrier when they heard the signal and avoid the shock. The other group was the control group that did not experience the stress shock.

In the study, 73 percent of the rats that had the stress from which they could not escape developed cancer. In the group that had the possibility of escape, or, as Siegal says, the element of hope, only 37 percent, or fewer than half of them, developed cancer. Actually, those with hope did better than those who had no shock at all. Well make of that study what you will, Dr. Siegal has found in his practice that patients who live with love and hope are more likely to find that light in the darkness than those who give up or develop bitterness.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. John says there is a voice in the wilderness, a light in the darkness, and that is so because Jesus is the light of the world. This third Sunday in Advent, we look for the light at the darkest time of the year and live with hope.

Emily Dickinson wrote, “Not knowing when the dawn will come, I open every door.” That’s where you and I live, with anticipation and hope. Open every door because you never know where the light will shine and surprise you. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. Live with hope. Everything is a miracle.