

Light and Dark

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship on Homeless Awareness & MLK Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 15, 2017

Texts: John 1:1-5

These beautiful words which begin the Gospel of John are the closest thing John has to a birth narrative for Jesus. Gone are the angels and the Virgin Mary. Gone is the long journey to Bethlehem, the baby in the manger, the singing angels and awestruck shepherds. Gone too are kings bearing gifts. None of that fluff for John. He just goes right for what he knows beyond all doubt is the most important thing he can tell anyone about Jesus – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Simply put, John begins his Gospel with the core message that Jesus and God are of the same substance. They are one. When John speaks of the “Word,” “Logos” in the Greek, it does not refer to the written or spoken word as we would immediately think. No, John was using “Word” in the sense the Greek philosophers used it. “Word” in Greek thought refers to the divine principle of reason bringing order to the universe, and linking the human and the divine. This is how John understands Jesus. Jesus is the divine principle of reason bringing order to the universe and linking humans and God. Jesus changed everything about how the world works, John is saying. Jesus changed everything about how humans relate to God and how God relates

to humans. And this didn't happen with the man Jesus who walked the earth as one of us. This has always been the case. It started "in the beginning" when God uttered those first words that brought the world into being.

In fact John uses those very same words from Genesis, "in the beginning" to begin his Gospel. God has changed everything through this person, this Savior Jesus Christ. God has taken us back to the very beginnings of Creation itself through this extraordinary man who has himself been with God since before the world came into being. "Without him not one thing came into being." This is it, folks. This is him, folks. This is our new beginning, this Jesus of Nazareth. Everything is new again. God has hit the cosmic reset button taking us all the way back to the very beginning of things when the earth was a formless void enveloped in darkness. This was a complete and total darkness, an inky blackness we cannot even begin to comprehend.

John is reminding us that in that moment of Creation darkness already existed. Everything was darkness, complete and total darkness as in the absence of all light. And then God called forth the light from the darkness. God *made* light from nothing but darkness. One moment there was nothing but inky blackness and then God spoke and light shimmered into being, piercing the darkness with shattering rays of brilliant, pure light. This is how Genesis describes God's first act of Creation in Genesis 1. Like a

sparkler spontaneously bursting into life in a totally darkened room. Spectacular! Breath-taking. Game changing. Life changing, forever.

This moment when Creation began, God's shattering of perpetual night literally by the in-breaking of God's Spirit, is what John is recalling in these lyrical words which begin his Gospel. But John doesn't stop there. He tells us why this matters, why this is so important to us and literally to all Creation. He reminds us that what came into being at that first moment when the light broke through was life itself. The light signified this new life now in existence because of the Logos. And this light, this spectacular, darkness shattering, game changing, everything is new again light means life to all people. And the light shines through that perpetual darkness, shattering it once and for all. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, does not, overcome it."

Powerful words. Life changing words. Simple words. Even humble. John grabs our attention with them and then continues on with the rest of his Gospel, with many stories and sermons by Jesus unique to this Gospel. John begins his Gospel by proclaiming that Jesus and God are one, that this incredible divine being brought everything we know and love into being including the very light which illuminates our days and guides our way forward through the darkness. John is in fact

proclaiming that new beginnings are always happening, always possible with this incredible God who creates light from darkness. John is proclaiming hope, now and in the future. John is reminding us that no matter how dark the moment we find ourselves in, God is always creating light in the midst of the darkness. God is always illuminating a way forward on a path through the inky blackness. The path may be obscured and hard to see sometimes when the darkness threatens to overwhelm. But it never disappears. It never leaves us. It never takes us deeper into the darkness. God's path forward, illuminated by the light God's own self calls forth from the darkness, always leads toward the light, toward the future, toward the place God calls us to be.

The thing is, though, we must make sure the light we see, the light we follow is from God, and not from something or even someone pretending to be the light. We must be sure the light we follow forward into the future is God's light alone, shimmering out from the very being of God's own self and not some battery-operated flashlight of our own creating. How do we know the light we follow is God's and not our own? Only one way to know for sure. What does the light call us to? What does the light ask of us? What does the light illuminate for us? God's light only ever illuminates one thing – that we are to love God with all that we are and that we have and we are to love the other, *the other*, as much as we love ourselves. The light of God reveals, in other

words, how well we love. God calls forth the light to guide us forward. God calls forth the love to show us what to do and how to do it and who needs it. God calls us forth to be the light the world so desperately needs.

This was brought home to me in the last 24 hours very powerfully as a group of us, anchored by our youth and their parents, kept a Vigil yesterday for homeless awareness here at our church. Lasting for 12 hours, from noon until midnight, we had an extraordinary experience. I've done these kinds of events before, but you're never quite sure how they will come off, how folks will react. Yesterday's Vigil exceeded all my expectations and then some. Let me tell you why.

The Vigil format came into being by accident since my original vision for this event was a more traditional one – a 24 hour sleep-out event. These were quite popular in the late 90's and early oughts, my own kids having participated in and been changed by participating in a number of them. In the 24 hour sleep-outs, the focus is on the kids braving the elements in the hopes they gain some appreciation of the challenges and deprivations faced by the homeless in our society. There is a drawback to these events, the main one being it is too easy for the kids to become focused on creating the structures and goofing around. The one at the church where I served for 20 years came to an end shortly a group of engineer dads took over the

construction of the homeless “shelter” creating a spacious dwelling complete with sub-flooring and tarps, even indoor lighting thanks to outdoor electrical extension cords. The meaning of the event was lost in that race for personal comfort.

Nonetheless, I had decided that forewarned was fore-armed and we could design an event that would put the emphasis where it needed to be. Then I got sick and other people got sick and suddenly a 24 hour sleep-out seemed completely overwhelming and totally unappealing. So in a conference call with the CE leadership team this past Monday evening we made the decision to transform the 24 hour sleep-out into a 12 hour vigil and that change I am convinced came directly from God. The Vigil format was perfect. It put the emphasis and kept the emphasis of the event exactly where it was always intended to be – on the homeless. The Vigil allowed us to do several things at once. We learned about homeless from the inside out as the kids created cardboard structures and we huddled around an outdoor fire on the coldest day of the week. It even started snowing in the early evening and still we stayed outside. We had a series of guest speakers from the WARM Shelter, one of whom was a current resident of the shelter and their outreach worker. They told us about their experiences and patiently answered all our questions. We also did what we could to help people in need right now with the coat and blanket drive, the hats and mittens drive and the

toiletries drive – all of which were very successful. We prepared a meal for the WARM Shelter which will be taken over their immediately worship today for their noon meal.

But the most important thing we did was the thing the folks from WARM thanked us for over and over again. It turned out to be the most important part of the Vigil and the thing we emphasized without fully realizing its significance. That was the idea of solidarity. For 12 hours we were in solidarity with the homeless. Someone stayed outside by that fire for almost the entire 12 hours. For 12 hours we had just a tiny taste of what it was to be homeless, and it was incredibly difficult. We came to have a glimmer of understanding of how easy it is to lose everything and become homeless as we listened to the folks from WARM. We realized that this problem is far more serious, far more difficult to resolve, far more challenging in every way than we had understood before. And we realized that our taking a stand to say to ourselves and this community – stop and pay attention to this problem, to the people suffering it and the people trying to fix it with fewer and fewer resources every year even though the numbers of homeless are increasing exponentially – taking this stand so visibly, putting ourselves on the frontlines if only for a few hours, was a powerful, powerful statement. And it is that statement, that witness, that meant the most to the people at WARM, staff and clients alike.

And it's so appropriate, I think, that we did this on Martin Luther King Weekend. Dr. King's message was one of justice sought, justice claimed, through non-violence and the powerful witness of presence. For 12 hours yesterday, that was our youth. That was their parents. That was us. What we do does make a real difference in the lives of real people every day. We learned that all over again yesterday, and I'm sure none of us will ever be quite the same as a result. I hope you'll talk to these kids this morning. Talk to their parents. Talk to some of our folks who stopped by during the day and the evening to drop off everything from coats and blankets to warm cookies and popcorn. We learned firsthand yesterday that we can live our faith in very real, very tangible ways and when we do, it makes a real difference. We can witness to Jesus. We can be the light the world so desperately needs right now. All we have to do is try, even a little bit, even for a few hours. What we do does matter. Thanks be to our God for the chance to be who God needs us to be. Amen.