

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Testify to the Light

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 61:1-4 (NRSV)

¹The 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.

Gospel Lesson

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NRSV)

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.

Bible/Sermon Focus

The Gospel of John is quite different from the other Gospels. In fact, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are together called the synoptic gospels, synoptic meaning "the same."

It is during Advent and Lent that we most often use texts from John, and some of what John says is downright strange. John has particular metaphors and theology that are specific to its text and would have been well-known to its audience. A number of these metaphors and this particular theology (how we think about and understand who God is and how God functions), are arguably specific to John's Gospel.

One of the metaphors that John uses is that of light versus darkness. In John's Gospel "darkness [can be] described as oppression, captivity, broken-heartedness, mourning. The light is good news, liberty and release, comfort, gladness and praise." Darkness is also used whenever someone doesn't understand that Jesus is actually the Messiah. They are "in the dark" about part of Jesus's identity.

How often do we feel "in the dark" about things? Perhaps we may find ourselves feeling that someone else is "in the dark" about who we really are. Maybe we want to "shed some light on the subject." This familiar use of word play in our modern context can be easily applied to John's Gospel.

The Old Testament never names Jesus as the Messiah. Rather, the one who is coming to save God's people is referred to with titles - words like Messiah and Emmanuel. The people were promised their Messiah. Those who understood that Jesus was indeed, *this* promised Messiah, were those John would say are "in the light." So, for John to testify to the light is for him to understand the true identity of Jesus as the Savior sent by God.

Again, we see a God who comes to us, not with fanfare, not in status, not even recognizable to a large number of people. We witness to a world of darkness, in which the light has been born. In this season of Advent, this season of darkness, we as Christians continue to ponder the darkness of our day, and the light of Christ that illuminates all possibilities, all futures, and all people.

Discussion Questions

1. Share a recent experience where you witnessed God's presence.
2. Why is witnessing important? Why is witnessing to the "light" in times of "darkness" important?
3. In John's witnessing, he is revealing his character, faithfully delivering a very challenging message in spite of the opposition of the status quo. When has witnessing be difficult or scary in your life?
4. What are some ways that we can find ourselves in the darkness? What are the ways that we can invite each other who are living in darkness to come back into the light of God?
5. Even though Jesus is not actually named in the Old Testament, how could God's light-bringer, the Messiah, be standing right there among the people and they wouldn't even know him?
6. How have we, the church, not only failed to recognize God's light-bringers in our midst, but maybe even actively prevented them from shining?

Prayer

Holy God, Messiah, Emmanuel, let our witness as individuals and as a church...
reflect divine light into the world's darkest places.
invite those who have lived in darkness to come out into the light of God.
be good news for the oppressed, freedom for the prisoner, comfort for the
broken-hearted, gladness and praise for those who mourn.

Amen.

How have we, the church, not only failed to recognize God's light-bringers in our midst, but maybe even actively prevented them from shining?