

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Can You See the Light?

John 1

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“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” And with that, we are introduced to John the Baptist in the Gospel of John which is kind of confusing for a lot of people. We have the Gospel of John referring to John the Baptist while the presumptive author of the Gospel of John is only referred to as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” So, people sometimes get confused about John the Baptist and think he’s the same John whose name headlines the Gospel of John. But these are two different people.

Confusion about John’s identity, I mean John the Baptist, is nothing new. “Who are you?” people asked him. The question was both incredulous and curious. “Who do you think you are out here in the wilderness baptizing people? Are you the messiah?” “No.” “Are you the prophet Elijah come back to us?” “No.” “Then who are you?”

One of the great gifts of John the Baptist was he had no illusion that he was something other than who he was. This is a great virtue when you know who you are and know your purpose in life. Most of us spend all our college years and a good portion of our adult lives figuring out who we are, and some of us never really think we know. John just knew. *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. He himself was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the light.*

John the Baptist is human witness to the cosmic event of the Light of the world. God is ordering a new creation, a new presence of divine light in the world but it necessitates a fellow human to point to its presence, otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it. John could see light where no one else could. This is the other great gift that John possessed. He could see what others couldn’t, perhaps because he knew who he was when others didn’t. John could see light where others couldn’t and gave his life to pointing people living in darkness to the Light of the world.

Both the John the Baptizer and John the Gospel writer want to put a question in front of us: can you see the light? In whatever darkness surrounds you, can you still see Light? This is a vital question for people who exist in a world that can seem hopeless and loveless. Scientifically speaking, darkness may simply be the absence of light, but in human experience, darkness has a force all its own. For children in the night, darkness is terrifying. For adults facing darkness of all kinds, it can be suffocating.

And still, some people have the gift of seeing light where others only can see darkness. A recent story about cosmic darkness and light caught my imagination and made me smile. Astronomers wanted to understand how dark deep space really is. Is deep space really pitch black, they wondered. To find out, they turned to photos sent back by the New Horizons spacecraft which

sailed past Pluto 5 years ago. It's now 50x farther from earth than the earth is from the sun. It's way out there in deep space.

Out there it's out past major sources of light and out beyond light reflecting off space dust floating around the solar system. The sun from way out there is just a distant speck of light. The astronomers looked specifically at empty photos, the boring ones, the ones without many bright stars then they processed those images to eliminate any known source of light in the photos—sun, distant stars, little smudges of galaxies—they were able to wipe those out of the photos. So, what's left when you take away all the light? What they found startled them. In the darkness of deep space, “the amount of light coming from mysterious sources was about equal to all the light coming in from the known galaxies.” One astrophysicist said “for 400 years, astronomers have been studying visible light and the sky in a serious way, and yet, somehow apparently, missed half the light in the universe.” “Maybe there's some unknown phenomenon in the universe that creates visible light.” <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/18/936219170/scientists-discover-outer-space-isnt-pitch-black-after-all>

Isn't that something, something to contemplate . . . I'm reminded of the psalmist, in his despair and in amazement of God's presence reflected, “the darkness is not dark to you, the night is bright as day, for darkness is as light to you.” Psalm 139.12

Light and darkness is one of the, and perhaps the, great image of God's redeeming relationship with creatures. In the beginning, God said let there be light, and still everywhere God's grace breaks in is like light coming into darkness. God said “Let there be light,” and there is light. Genesis points this way. The Gospel of John certainly does as well. All through the scripture God's redemption isn't just affirmation of human progress and knowledge—affirmation of human enlightenment. God's redemption is inbreaking rescue of those who have no power to rescue themselves from sin and death. It is justice for those who have no power of their own to overcome injustice. It is conversion for those who can say, “God came into my life and changed my life. I was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see.” For Christians, this work of grace is described by the doctrine of justification. Justification is the name of God's inbreaking grace for people who cannot save themselves by their own abilities. It is light in our darkness, which is good news because there's darkness and then there's capital D-Darkness. The darker it is, the more we need the light.

The difference between darkness and capital D-Darkness is the doctor saying “here's the next thing we can try” and saying “there's nothing more we can do.” It's the difference between working for a job you're not crazy about and being laid off with no prospects. There's darkness and then there's Darkness.

Some people experience Christ as a comforting presence on lonely days or an encouragement to be kinder and gentler people than they might be otherwise. Christ is a nudge to goodness or a solid rock to stand on walking through the uncertainties of life. Christ is a source of stability, a light illuminating an otherwise dusky path.

But there are those who live in deep darkness of pain, grief, despair, or sin. Is there any hope at all for them? That's the Gospel question. Is Christ's light strong enough to reach even those who are lost in deepest darkness? Is Christ's light strong enough to reach the deep darkness dwelling within all people as fallen creatures? This is the Gospel question, and it is why Advent stories are always stories of darkness and light and light in the darkness.

John looked out upon the congregation of humanity gathered before him and said, "among you stands who whom you do not know". John could see what others couldn't. Yet. But they would. So many of them would. They would see in Jesus what they couldn't see before. Nicodemus coming to him at night. The woman at the well at noon. Peter, in his shame.

Isaiah could see the light. Into a despairing time of exile, the good news bursts in: The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaimed liberty to the captives, to release the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Those who mourn, they shall be comforted. Instead of ashes, a garland; instead of mourning, the oil of gladness, instead of a faint spirit, the mantle of praise. They shall build up ancient ruins, they shall repair ruined cities... Isaiah could see what no one else could yet see. He could see hope, light in the dark.

In an uncertain time, the Thessalonian Christians were growing despondent. Christ had not returned as they expected and a generation of Christians were dying and being buried. Where is the hope? Apostle Paul writes do not give up hope, or faith, or the love of God and one another. Rejoice, pray, give thanks in everything, in spite of everything. Paul could see life. There is light in this darkness.

Don't tell me this year is hopelessly dark, and all the lights have gone dim. There is light even when the regular sources of light have been smudged out of the photo.

Light in darkness is a doctor taking a few extra minutes to talk plainly about the situation you're facing. I've seen that light this year.

Light in the darkness is the glow on a man's face whose hungry family received an unexpected basket of Thanksgiving food on their doorstep. I've seen that this year, too.

Light in the darkness is people on balconies serenading one another and clapping for Covid nurses coming off their long shifts; it is Yo-Yo Ma playing an impromptu concert in the subway; it is a city park filled with people from all over the community, from all walks of life—black-, brown-, and white-skinned, all taking a knee for 7 silent minutes in vigil for a murdered man they never met; I've seen that this year.

I've seen light in the darkness.

I've seen it in grade school teachers who not only have had to reinvent classroom education for online school but who then at night call families to ask about boys and girls who are struggling. And they refuse to let them go. There's a little more light every time political leaders tell the truth even when the truth is inconvenient to their constituency and their campaigns.

I've seen light this year, even this year, even in a year when it has seemed at times that we must be living in the dusk of human decency and the twilight of democracy. In times of darkness, we can still say, there is light here. It is all around.

I've seen forgiveness between enemies, marriages restored after being on the brink, and compassion to strangers. I've seen the fire of faith flicker to life in young people. God's grace is all around. God's mercy is around us, all around us still.

This week at a drive through line at a Dairy Queen in Brainerd, Minnesota, someone paid for their ice cream, and then kindly gave extra to pay for the car behind them. A Nice gesture. That car, whose lunch was now paid for, did the same for the car behind them, and then that car did it. And it was on. I mean, it was on. The DQ worker at the window told each driver who pulled up, your ticket is paid for. And each car, each car for 2 ½ days paid for the one behind it. 900 people received a gift from someone they didn't know and then gave a gift to someone they didn't know.

I think about the employees inside, preparing and serving food and ice cream to the hungry, still coming to work in the hot confines of a kitchen in the middle of a pandemic. Some frontline workers are too often way overlooked. General Manager Tina Jenson said, "So the lady pulled up and I said, 'Just to let you know, the gentleman in front of you paid for your order. If you like I can pay it forward, and you can pay for the order behind you and we can keep this going,'" Jensen recalled, joking that it was the woman's "lucky day."

This must have been fun for them, right? This must have been lively. Did they ring a bell in the kitchen each time someone continued the grace train; did they think of Christmas Eve candlelight services where each person lights the candle of the next until the darkness and each face glows with a light that is not their own.

There was an update: "Not sure if it's the sun shining, or the Christmas Spirit is already here... But it started with one, and we are now at about 48 cars that have paid it forward!"

I wonder which one had the foresight to start counting, and what did they think as the count ticked up one after another . . .100 . . .200. "Our kitchen crew was like, 'Are we really still going?' I said, 'Yep, we're still going,'" She said, "Especially now and how things have been going this year, it definitely helped us here in the store with our crew members," she said, adding that everyone was "very excited" to witness such kindness during a "rough" year.

<https://www.foxnews.com/food-drink/dairy-queen-customers-pay-it-forward>

Did they know, way out there in the bleak Minnesota midwinter, their little burger stand for a moment was lit up like the star of Bethlehem.